

THE WELSH  
CRØSS  
MYSTERY

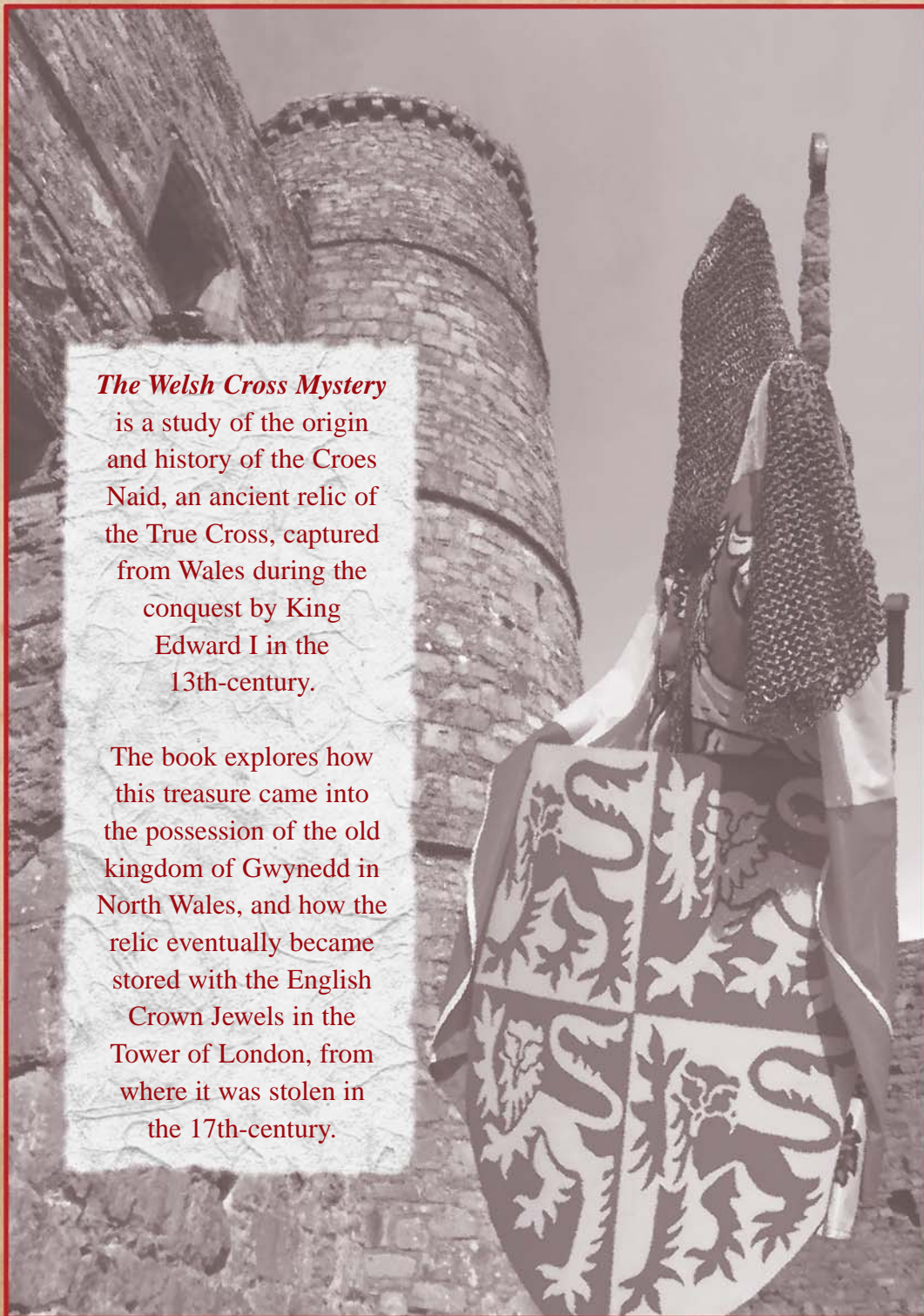




***The Welsh Cross Mystery***

is a study of the origin and history of the Croes Naid, an ancient relic of the True Cross, captured from Wales during the conquest by King Edward I in the 13th-century.

The book explores how this treasure came into the possession of the old kingdom of Gwynedd in North Wales, and how the relic eventually became stored with the English Crown Jewels in the Tower of London, from where it was stolen in the 17th-century.






THE WELSH  
CRØSS  
MYSTERY

*A Journal from a Pilgrimage*

Peter Ogwen Jones





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**INTRODUCTION 1**

*One* **HOLY FAMILIES 9**

*Two* **HELEN'S DISCOVERY 27**

*Three* **DISCOVERING ELEN 55**

*Four* **CROSS CRUSADES 93**

*Five* **WELSH WARS 119**

*Six* **TREASURED CROSS 147**

*Seven* **CHAPEL RELIC 183**

*Eight* **REFORMATION LOSS 209**

*Nine* **JESUIT INTRIGUE 223**

*References* 253





## 1 INTRODUCTION

*“It is a pilgrimage that will take us through some two thousand years of folk-memory and recorded history.”*



PILGRIM WINDOW - CHESTER CATHEDRAL

**Bardsey Island** (Welsh *Ynys Enlli*) is thought to be one of the holiest sites of pilgrimage in the ancient kingdom of Gwynedd. In the Arthurian era of the 6th-century, Saint Cadfan of a noble family in Brittany arrived here and founded a monastic settlement, dedicated to Mary, mother of Jesus. Cadfan remained the abbot until his death in 542. In recent years it was discovered that the monks cultivated a unique type of apple (Welsh *afal* – pronounced *aval*). Arthurian stories tell us that the wounded King Arthur was taken to *Ynys Afallach* after his final battle. Reputed to be the burial site of 20,000 saints, it is also said that Merlin (Welsh *Myrddin Wyllt*) is buried on Bardsey.







Investigating *The Welsh Cross Mystery* presents us with a significant challenge at the outset, since this famous relic of the True Cross from the crucifixion of Jesus Christ appears under a variety of names in the medieval chronicles and various state records, these being the primary sources of information. This rather confusing situation was not improved by later historians and other writers – the secondary sources – most of whom tend to repeat the earlier explanations for the name, with spelling variations that confound the confusion still further. For example, in 1283 it was recorded as ‘*Crosseneyht*’ and by 1308 the object was referred to as ‘*Crucem Gnayth*’ in the Latin texts. Today in Wales the precious relic that emerged from the ancient kingdom of Gwynedd is generally referred to as the *Croes Naid* (sometimes *Croes Nawdd*), which could simply translate as the cross of refuge, sanctuary or salvation. Obviously, any relic of the cross would have that symbolic meaning, having undergone centuries of religious-cultural reinforcement. The actual naming of an artefact like a decorated and embellished cross would simply have occurred as a convenience, if it occurred at all, and would usually be in reference to its place of origin, or sometimes by association with a well-known owner, either an individual or a particular abbey, church or other religious institution. The Welsh ‘name’ refers to the relic itself, rather than its reliquary or container.

When the relic was in the possession of the Royal House of Gwynedd, it is unlikely to have had a name as such. It would not have needed one. It was simply their piece of the True Cross amongst this dynasty’s treasures, and giving it a name would perhaps seem quite superfluous to its then owners. Probably the first appearance of the *Welsh Cross* in the written records of the Middle Ages was in the year 1241, when negotiations that included territorial rights in North Wales were taking place between King Henry III (1207-1272) of England and Dafydd ap Llywelyn (1212-1246) of Gwynedd. The document recording the various points of agreement between the two parties ends with Dafydd declaring that he has ‘*sworn upon the Holy Cross, which I cause to be carried before me, firmly to respect and hold these certain promises, grants and pacts, of free will, to the full safety of the king himself and his heirs.*’<sup>1</sup> That the relic was of great significance to the Welsh ruler is evident from his use of it on this and presumably similar occasions, as yet unidentified. Like his contemporaries King Henry himself was an avid collector of relics, so the manner of Dafydd’s oath would have carried the necessary weight of solemnity and credibility required by the king.

In the various old documents of England in which the *Welsh Cross* appears, the challenge confronting the medieval writers is quite evident. The Welsh word *naid* led to a multiplicity of interpretations at the hands of state record-keepers and early chroniclers, each of whom was writing in the Anglo-Norman French of the Plantagenet kings of England and also in Latin. Few, if any, of these individuals would have been familiar with the Welsh language in its written form, and it is quite unlikely that any would have heard it spoken, unless they lived on the border between the two countries. Consequently, all manner of linguistic approximations arose and in this book a dozen or so names for the artefact appear from state records, chronicles and historic works of one form or another. It is for this reason that the object is simply referred to as the *Welsh Cross* throughout this book.

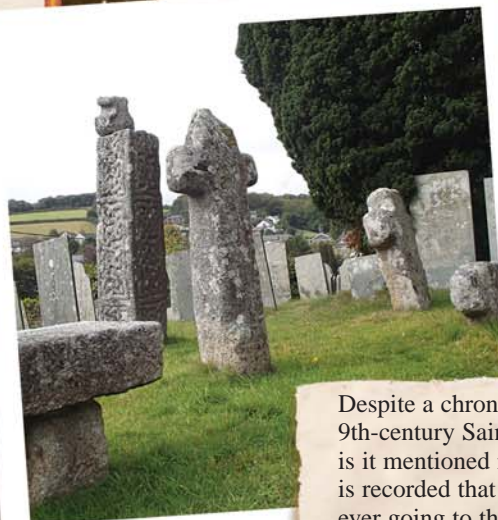
Just as non-Welsh writers struggled to interpret the word *naid*, so too did they engage in tortuous efforts to offer explanations for why the object was so called, the commonest and most often repeated being of a supposed connection with a saint from the Dark Ages. A Benedictine monk by the name of William Rishanger (c.1250-c.1312), from the English abbey of St. Albans, was a keen chronicler of his own times and he offered the explanation that the object of such veneration in North Wales – and later England – originated with a Saxon monk called Saint Neot. Rishanger claimed that Neot had brought it from the Holy Land in the mid-800s, but the chronicler offers no explanation for this unique assertion, still less a source for the claim.

So who was this Saint Neot? Some writers all too swiftly point out that he was based in Cornwall and therefore not connected with Wales. What is being blatantly overlooked here is the fact that the Welsh and the Cornish are linguistic relations and cultural cousins. They are Celtic people who were collectively referred to simply as Britons by the Romans, and generally differentiated by their regional tribes in the imperial colony of Britannia during the first four centuries of the common era. Even the last part of the name *Cornwall* has the

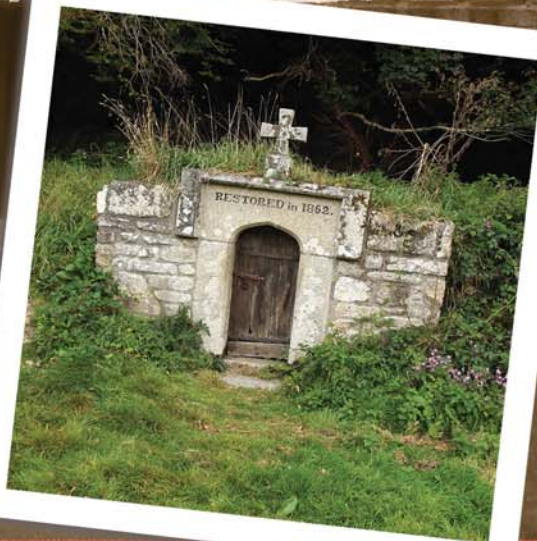
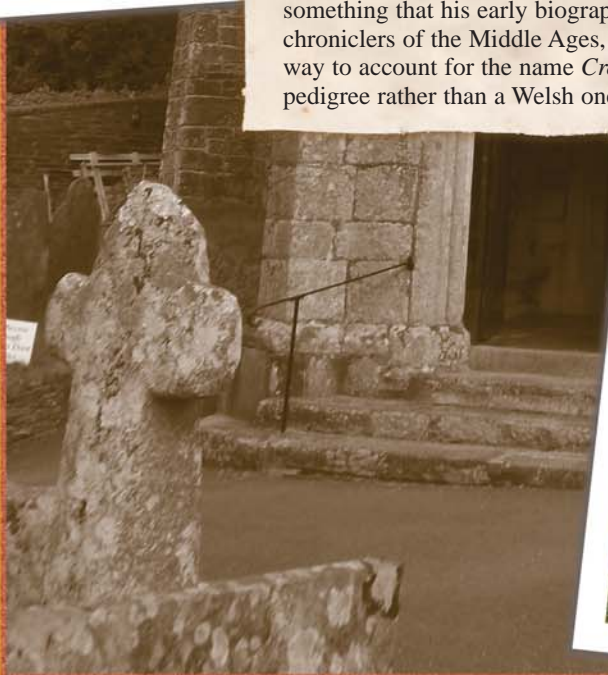


## Saint Anietus

St. Neot's Church  
Cornwall



Despite a chronicler telling us that the *Welsh Cross* was connected with the 9th-century Saint Neot, there is nothing in his church to suggest this and nor is it mentioned in this saint's 11th-century biography – *Vita Sancti Neoti*. It is recorded that he visited the pope in Rome, but there is no record of Neot ever going to the Holy Land and obtaining a piece of the True Cross. It is not something that his early biographers would have overlooked. For subsequent chroniclers of the Middle Ages, inventing such a story would have gone some way to account for the name *Croes Naid*, thereby giving the artefact a Saxon pedigree rather than a Welsh one.





same linguistic root as the word Welsh, from the Germanic word *wealas* meaning foreigner or stranger. The source of this was the newly-arrived (and therefore the actual foreigners) Anglo-Saxons, who eventually defined their Wessex kingdom's territorial boundary in the 10th-century as the River Tamar, which broadly separates the modern counties of Devon and Cornwall. Although counties of England that part of Britain is still referred to as the *West Country*, as though emphasising a certain foreignness. When the Saxon ruler Athelstan drove the 'West Welsh' out of Exeter in 936, they were banished to the land west of the Tamar, and Cornwall continued to be known as 'West Wales' by its Anglo-Saxon neighbours.

Saint Neot lived in the 9th-century, initially as a monk at Glastonbury Abbey and then going off to lead a hermit's life in a remote area of rural Cornwall. Apparently, he was remarkably short of stature (hence *Neotus* is said to mean 'Little One') and would stand on an iron stool during mass at Glastonbury, the object having achieved relic status at that abbey in subsequent years. After his death in the 870s Neot's remains were interred in an early Cornish church, which was previously associated with a Saint Guerriir, whose name has spelling variations and about whom nothing is known. Today the village of St. Neot near the Cornish town of Liskeard retains the original association, although in the 11th-century this settlement was referred to as '*Saint Anietus*', where a small group of monks lived. Earlier still, in the late 800s, it was probably the place recorded as '*Neotestoc*'. By the 13th-century the chronicler and monk at St. Albans Abbey, Roger of Wendover (died 1236) was writing about Neot leading a solitary life at '*Hamstoke*', which just serves to illustrate the wayward nature of place-names in the older records.

There also remains some uncertainty as to whether the Celtic Saint Anietus and the Saxon Neot were one and the same person, the names having just become muddled through time. The Cornish parish church (opposite page) is dedicated to Anietus, while the village it stands in is named after Neot. For consistency we shall focus on Neot, whose remains were stolen from Cornwall by the Saxons and removed to a priory in England, where the historic county of Huntingdonshire (part of Cambridgeshire since 1974) eventually acquired a settlement called St. Neots. It was there that his relics are said to have ended up. The *Chronicle of Croyland Abbey*<sup>2</sup> says that Neot's remains were removed yet again to avoid the depredations of Danish invaders in 992, but eventually they were returned to their home in Huntingdonshire after the threat had passed. Needless to say, the Cornish were less than happy about the so-called 'translation' of Neot's remains to England – it was theft plain and simple. In 1050 Cornwall fell under the Diocese of Exeter, resulting in treasured relics of Cornish saints ending up in English abbeys, including Glastonbury's growing hoard. The Britons of the West Country could offer little resistance to their mighty neighbours.

From Asser's contemporary biography of King Alfred (849-899) we learn that this Wessex monarch regularly sought Saint Neot's spiritual guidance, and on one occasion Neot castigated the king for his sinful behaviour. Neot advised Alfred to atone by sending alms to Rome, in return for which the pope sent Alfred a gift of a relic of the True Cross. Asser the biographer was a monk from St. David's in South Wales and around the year 885 the king had invited him to come to Wessex and help revive the flagging Anglo-Saxon culture of learning and religion. Perhaps it was this remarkably tenuous association with Wales that prompted medieval chroniclers to directly connect Neot with Alfred's relic, and in turn assume it was the origin of the *Welsh Cross*, struggling as these English monks obviously did while trying to account for that name, *Croes Naid*. They may even have imagined that *naid* was some Welsh word interpretation of the name Neot – it is not. Also, these chroniclers were writing centuries after the era of Saint Neot.





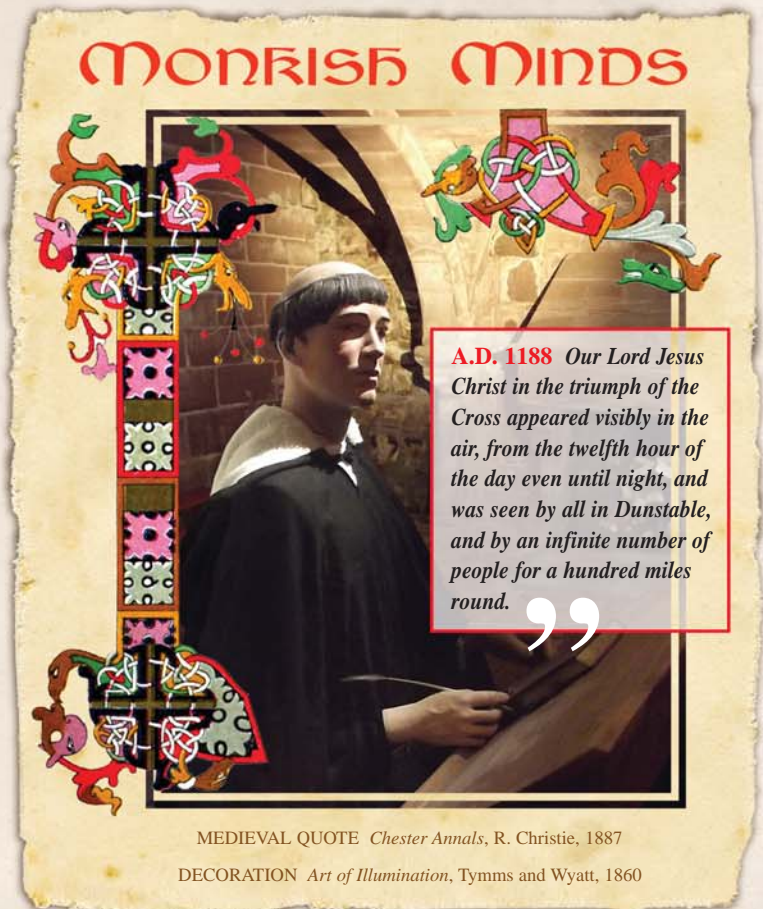
## 5 INTRODUCTION

Was the *Welsh Cross* brought from the Holy Land by Saint Neot, as claimed by Rishanger and repeated by other writers? We need look for evidence no further than the *Vita Sancti Neoti*, the saint's biography, the earliest version of this example of Anglo-Saxon hagiography being dated to the 11th-century, although the five surviving manuscripts date to the 12th-century. There is no mention whatever of Neot going to the Holy Land, still less his collecting a relic of the True Cross on this pilgrimage that never happened. A study<sup>3</sup> from 1985 states that the early chroniclers, William of Malmesbury (c.1095/6-c.1143) and Henry of Huntingdon (c.1088-c.1154) both knew of the *Vita Sancti Neoti*, so they are likely to have known that Neot did not go to Jerusalem and pick up a relic souvenir. Henry does record that in the year 883 King Alfred received a piece of the wood of the True Cross from the pope, this writer's source being the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* which originated in Alfred's Wessex kingdom.

Nevertheless, Rishanger's story-line seems to have stuck fast in the annals, and it has been endlessly repeated until becoming accepted as historic fact. In the 14th-century *Chronicle of Glastonbury*<sup>4</sup>, the writer – simply known as John – also relied on Neot's *Vita* for research purposes, and although he too mentions Alfred's piece of the True Cross being given to Glastonbury Abbey, again there is no suggestion that Neot had also acquired such a relic, or that he had journeyed to the Holy Land. Prior to Neot leaving the abbey for a hermit's life in Cornwall, this saintly monk served as the sacristan at Glastonbury, a role that would have included being custodian of the abbey's relics and related treasures. So, here is yet another potential association that may have inspired Rishanger to imagine Neot acquiring a True Cross relic, his imagination going into overdrive when he came to writing about the conquest of Gwynedd in the 1280s and the English king's acquisition of the *Welsh Cross* as war booty.

Maybe a visit to Saint Neot's church in Cornwall could help clarify matters. The present church is largely 15th-century, although the west tower is earlier. There is a stained-glass window from 1528 in the church, depicting his life's major events, which included a meeting with the pope, shown in the photograph on page 3 handing the saint the gift of an aspergillum, used for sprinkling holy water. There is no glass panel with a specific cross or relic depiction in the window, and it is not something that would have been overlooked, given the importance attached to both this saint and the ultimate relic, the True Cross. And nor are there any references to such a relic in the various legends and folk-memory associated with Saint Neot. So what inspired Rishanger?

Monkish minds would come up with all manner of things, if only to avoid a void, as they busily illuminated the margins of manuscript folios with decorations, a devotional activity to amuse themselves and inspire their readers. The monastic daily routine of copying one manuscript after another probably demanded some creative relief in those days before printing. And as their handiwork – illustrated above – shows they were remarkably imaginative and highly skilled. Textual inclusions could sometimes be as fanciful as their illustration work, the quotation from the *Chester Annals* for the year 1188 being a case in point.





Several post-medieval writers even came up with the ‘explanation’ that the *Croes Naid* had some connection with the town of Neath (Welsh *Castell-nedd*) in South Wales, but here again it appears to be nothing more than words having a similar sound. There was a Roman fort there called Nidum, the name deriving from the local river name of Nedd. The pronunciation of both Naid, or Nawdd, and Nedd would, to the non-Welsh ear, sound pretty much the same, the double-D sounding rather like the syllable ‘the’ in the English word lathe. There is no evidence whatsoever that this particular relic had a direct connection with South Wales, and all the contemporary records connect the artefact exclusively with the rulers of Gwynedd in North Wales. A probable inspiration for these later associations with South Wales may stem from historians of Margham Abbey, a few miles south of Neath. Founded in 1147, the abbey’s treasures did include a piece of the ‘most precious wood of the True Cross’, according to medieval sources. In a 13th-century agreement between the abbot and the local ruler, Lleision ap Morgan, the abbey’s relic is referred to as being contained within a cross, along with other relics of the ‘*holy apostles, martyrs, confessors and virgins*’.<sup>5</sup> Stuffed full with these assorted relics, this cross was kept on the high altar so it was probably not particularly large, the fragment of the True Cross being correspondingly small like innumerable others. The *Welsh Cross* piece of the Holy Wood was noteworthy for being unusually large, but more on that later when we consider its size.

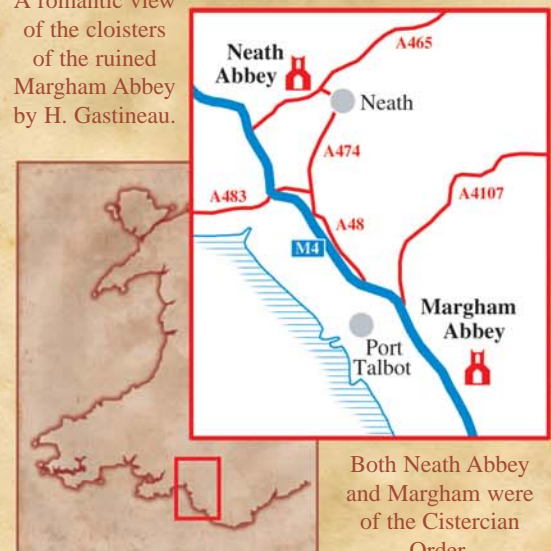
As we shall explore in this book, there are compelling connections to be made with the 4th-century Saint Helen, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, and her little-known contemporary, Saint Elen of Caernarfon in Gwynedd, and these

## Margham Abbey



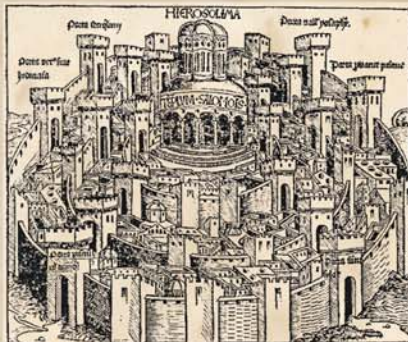
ILLUSTRATION *History of Wales*, B.B. Woodward, 1853

A romantic view of the cloisters of the ruined Margham Abbey by H. Gastineau.



Both Neath Abbey and Margham were of the Cistercian Order.

## Invention of the True Cross



JERUSALEM

ILLUSTRATION *Nuremberg Chronicle*, 1493

Emperor Constantine’s mother Helen is said to have visited the Holy Land in the 320s and, with the aid of local people and a miracle or two to have discovered (hence ‘Invention’) the cross on which Jesus was crucified. She is also credited with finding the nails used at the time.

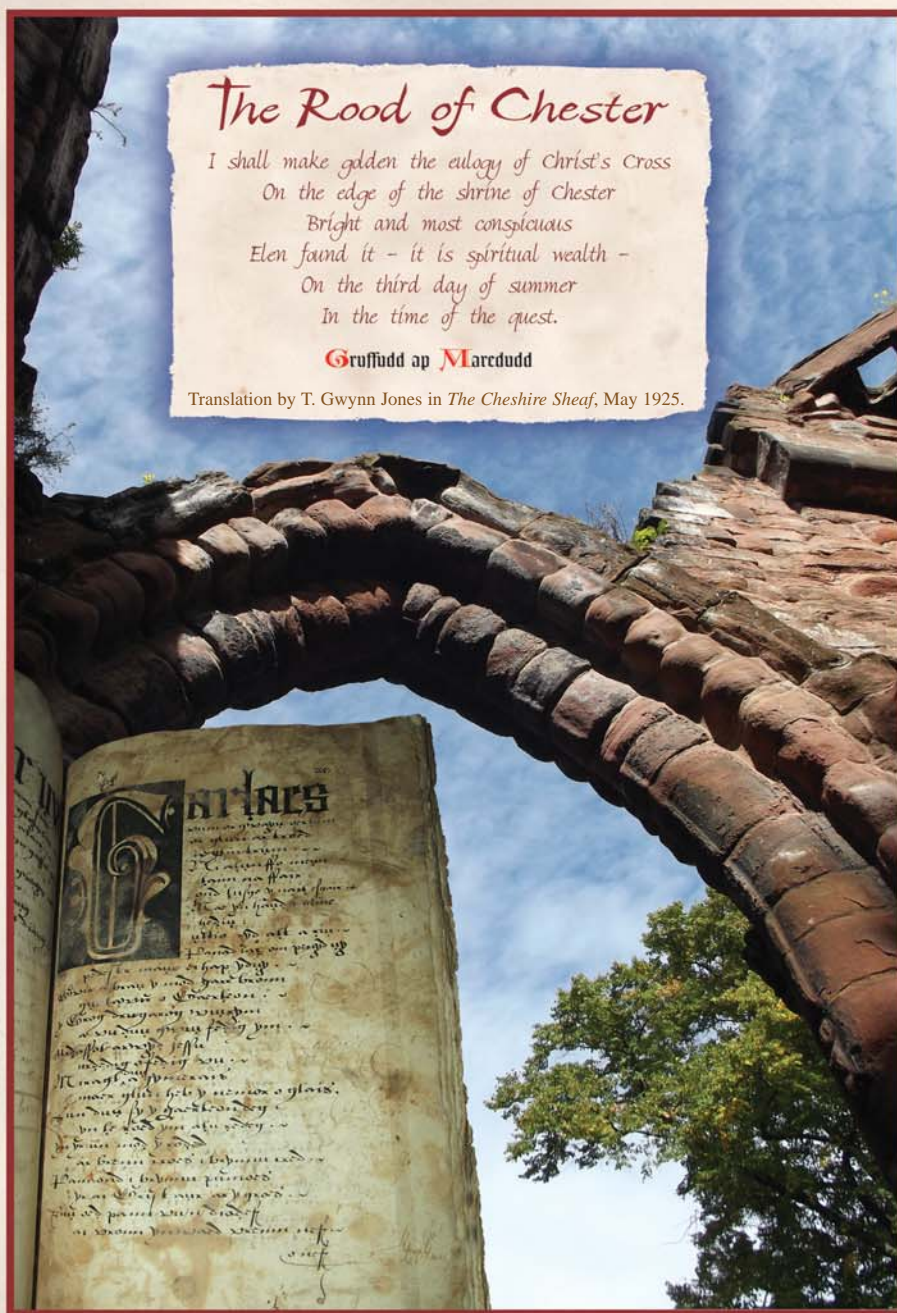




links form a chain that flows through this book. We would know more from Welsh sources had the documents survived, and the fleeting references to the *Croes Naid* in extant medieval Welsh poetry is of no great help for our purposes. Active between 1490 and 1532, the Welsh poet Sion ap Hywel likens the loss of his patron to the loss of the *Croes Naid*, which had been seized and taken to England in the 13th-century. Similarly, Guto'r Glyn, who lived through the 15th-century flatteringly likens his mid-Wales patron, Dafydd Llwyd, to the '*Croes Naid*', along with sundry worthies from the past. In a praise poem to a woman named Elsbeth he describes her as having more grace than the *Croes Naid*. Whether he was alluding to the relic in the form of the *Welsh Cross*, or metaphorically to the symbolic nature of the cross itself is a matter of interpretation and conjecture. Another Welsh poet of that century, Lewys Glyn Cothi seemed marginally more

specific when he wrote: '*Like the Croes Naid we must thee extol, while others are to be accounted as trifling relics*'.<sup>6</sup> When the poet wrote these lines the *Welsh Cross* was in the possession of England's monarchy.

None of these poetic texts can tell us about the relic's origin, still less its history and actual appearance. This is especially unfortunate and in some ways surprising, given that many Welsh poets of the Middle Ages were greatly inspired by other crosses and crucifixes. For example, Dafydd ap Gwilym from the 1300s wrote about one in Carmarthen, while several others enthused over the '*Rood of Chester*', a large crucifix (rood) that was believed by many to have been miraculously washed up on the shore of the River Dee in the ancient city. It seems to have arrived in the early 1200s and was installed in the church of Saint John the Baptist, where it attracted not only Welsh poets but also countless pilgrims, many seeking cures through its claimed healing powers. It was also said to contain a piece of the True Cross, and the 14th-century William Langland swore by the '*Rode of Chestre*' in his literary masterpiece, *The Vision of Piers the Ploughman*. An extract from an ode to the Chester crucifix by an Anglesey poet, Gruffudd ap Maredudd of the second half of the 1300s, is shown above, along with the ruined part of St. John's old church, known as the church of the Holy Cross from





the late 13th-century. The original manuscript, which is in the National Library of Wales, displays another poem to the Chester crucifix, this one being by Maredudd ap Rhys who flourished in the 15th-century. The quote gives a flavour of this literary mode in the Bardic tradition of Wales. Gruffudd was seeking a cure for his lameness at this famous shrine, and a poet of the same period, Ifan Brydydd Hir, goes so far as to claim he was relieved of old age by the relic's intervention.

Like innumerable others, the Chester crucifix probably disappeared through the destructive forces of the Reformation in later years, a state of affairs summed-up by the antiquary Browne Willis (1682-1760), when referring to the poor condition of Chester Cathedral in his day: *'There remain no ancient monuments legible; for in the Rebellion [Civil War] the church was turned into a stable, and these, with everything ornamented, violated'*.<sup>7</sup> The writer is complaining about the colossal destruction that took place in Britain during the Cromwellian Era, when places of worship were transformed beyond recognition from their former highly decorative and colourful state. Black and white became the austere clothing and interior design theme of that puritanical period of British history.

We cannot begin to guess at what information may have been lost to us from original Welsh archive material, the final conquest of the country in the 1200s having wrought devastation on the depositories of such records: the abbeys and other religious houses founded by the royal families of the Welsh kingdoms. And kingdoms they were, just as existed in what eventually became the unified, single kingdom of England, incorporating Alfred's kingdom of Wessex, where the West-Saxons lived. Unfortunately, history speaks not of Welsh kings but of princes, because, as always, history is written by the victors and not by the vanquished. The Anglo-Saxon and then Norman rulers came to regard the Welsh nobility as their vassals, and frequent cross-border warfare sought to hammer home the point.

One 19th-century Welsh historian, Reverend R.W. Morgan lamented, paraphrasing the poet Guto'r Glyn from 1450: *'all the ancient national documents which fostered the pride and spirit of the Cymry [the Welsh] were forcibly collected, conveyed to the Tower [of London] and destroyed'*.<sup>8</sup> The Welsh literature that did survive from the Middle Ages barely saw the light of day – let alone translation – until around the 1700s and the Age of Antiquaries. One in particular, Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709) pioneered in this dissemination of awareness through the growing publication of antiquarian journals of one form or another. And it was really not until the 19th-century that the great value of the Welsh literary heritage was finally becoming recognised and more widely circulated. An English historian summed things up by saying that Welsh literature was *'as little known in England, or in Europe, as the compositions of the Chinese.'*<sup>9</sup>

Such is the elusive background, emphasising why this journal of a pilgrimage acquired the word 'mystery' in its title. We shall endeavour to find out how and when the object came into being, where it remained and, finally, where it ended up. It is a pilgrimage that will take us through some two thousand years of folk-memory and recorded history. For the task in hand, each of these sources shall be regarded as equally valid. Afterall, information is encoded in many forms, as we of the Information Age are all too aware.

Peter Ogwen Jones  
Gwynedd 2020











Although the *Welsh Cross* does not emerge into written history until the Middle Ages, our story really begins within a relatively short time of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The imperial province of Judea was a constant thorn in the side of Rome, unstable and filled with a rebellious populace who, understandably enough, resented the legions' presence in their 'Promised Land'. Uprisings came and went, the Judean rebels being thrashed into submission by the unstoppable might of Rome and its insatiable lust for power, territory and wealth.

Tried and convicted Jesus was sentenced to death by crucifixion, a form of execution mainly imposed on enemies of the Roman state, although slaves who murdered their masters experienced such a fate under the law of the time, as did those who committed piracy. Later history was to put the blame for his mode of death squarely onto the shoulders of the Jews, but their ruling council at the time, the Sadducean priests of the Sanhedrin, did not have the authority or power to execute anyone by crucifixion. The worst they could manage was stoning to death and even that had to be sanctioned by the occupying Roman government. As far as the Jewish council was concerned, Jesus had committed blasphemy by challenging the *status quo* of the Temple and its ruling elite, all of whom would be keen to avoid upsetting the Roman presence. So the leader of the Sanhedrin, Caiaphas, saw to it that Jesus was brought before the hand-washing procurator of the province, Pontius Pilate, who clearly struggled with bringing a secular charge of sedition against Jesus. The rest is, as they say, history, or at least as we find it in a compilation of texts known as the New Testament.

And what a biased history it is, because what we have is a romano-centric version of events, with even Pilate ensuring that he was not held accountable by washing his hands of the matter. By implication this meant that Rome was not responsible either, despite the glaring fact that Jesus was crucified under Roman command. This legacy has dominated Christian perceptions for centuries, with Latin remaining the language of knowledge and power until relatively recent times. The power-base of Christianity itself was inevitably to become Rome and it was to remain so for the best part of two millennia, eclipsing and persecuting much that did not accord with its firmly held beliefs in the destiny of the so-called 'Eternal City'. Despite Rome asserting supremacy within the Christian arena, the new religion did get off to a fairly shaky start with



A reconstructed Roman altar depicts the figure of Mithras slaying a bull. The Mysteries of Mithras cult was especially popular with the Roman military, including Constantine.

COLLECTION Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



A small gold coin (14) from 316AD shows emperor Constantine with the sun disk behind his head, a design that led to the halo or nimbus motif in Christian iconography. Coin 15 from 338 shows his sons, each of whom received imperial status.







Joseph of Arimathea as depicted in a 20th-century window at St. John the Baptist church in Glastonbury, the chalice symbol of the Holy Grail being shown at the top.

Dating to the Middle Ages, Cotehele House in Cornwall has a chapel window depicting an angel collecting the blood of Jesus in a chalice.



the Roman emperor Constantine the Great (c.272-337). It was he who decreed toleration towards Christianity in the Empire, and yet he himself had a life-long commitment to the pagan cult of *Sol Invictus* – the Unconquered Sun – with its roots in the Mithraic Mysteries of Persia and beyond. It was Constantine who decreed in 321 that Sunday should be the ‘day of rest’, although we can immediately see in the word that it has more to do with his solar deity than the Judeo-Christian God. Constantine certainly set things in motion for the new religion, but it was probably his mother Helen who was the more wedded to the new faith.

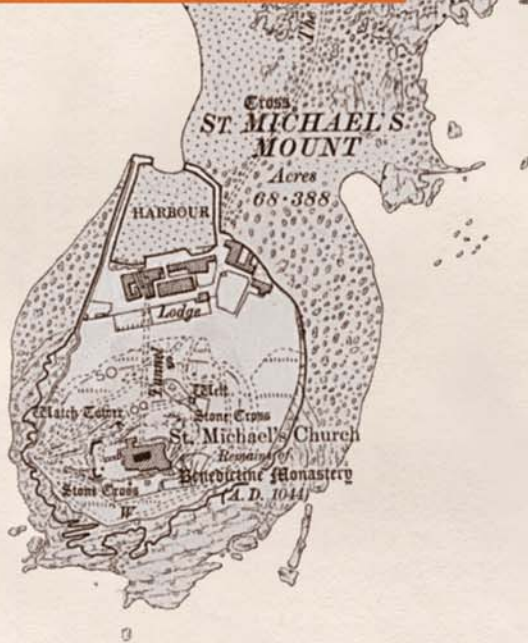
Emerging into first century Judea, we need to inquire into the possible links with Britain to explore the mystery of the *Welsh Cross*. Obviously, Jesus had family, friends and followers, but what became of them? The Bible is relatively fulsome on the subject of some followers, with at least two major players – Peter and Paul – ending their days in Rome. It should always be borne in mind that the Bible was originally compiled and heavily edited under Roman supervision, so when it comes to the post-crucifixion destiny of Jesus’s family members silence prevails.

Let us consider the man known as Joseph of Arimathea, who was responsible for obtaining the body of Jesus from the Roman authorities and making available a tomb. Clearly, he was close to Jesus because he could claim the body, and also to the authorities who allowed him to do so. In the Latin *Vulgate Bible* of the late 4th-century, Joseph is referred to as ‘*Nobilis Decurio*’. It was a familiar Roman title for someone in charge of metal mines, and as such he was an important individual, enjoying considerable status, including membership of the Sanhedrin.<sup>1</sup> In the Gospels Joseph is described as ‘*a rich man*’ (Matthew 27:57) and ‘*a disciple of Jesus*’, although another New Testament writer adds that Joseph was secretive about his support of Jesus for fear of reprisals (John 19:38). Both the Sanhedrin and the Roman authorities would have reacted swiftly had they been aware that Joseph was also a devout follower.

Rome’s empire-building activities were generated by the pursuit of wealth, with the acquisition of metals of one form or another being crucial to their war-driven strategies. Gold and silver were certainly sought in vast quantities, but tin was another highly prized commodity because it was used in making bronze. The West Country region of Britain was particularly active in tin mining and it is believed that the Greeks called the British Isles the *Cassiterides* – the Tin Islands. The 1st-century BC Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus noted the following: ‘*They that inhabit the British promontory of Belerium [Britain’s West Country], by reason of their converse with merchants, are more civilised and courteous to strangers than the rest. These are the people that make the tin, which [...] they beat into four square pieces like a die and carry it to a British isle, near at hand, called Ictis. For at low tide [...] they convey over in carts an abundance of tin*’.<sup>2</sup>

‘*Ictis*’ is thought by many to refer to Cornwall’s St. Michael’s Mount (pictured opposite), which is only isolated at high tide. Others have suggested different locations, but this Cornish one is an obvious candidate.





### *'Joseph was in the tin-trade'*

The ancient corporate image of the Cornish community of East Looe depicts an adult and a youth afloat in a ship, a visual expression of the folk-memory of Joseph and Jesus visiting Cornwall's tin trade.



*'This ship in the town seal bears three escutcheons on her side, with the same arms on each, viz. three bandlets, and its legend is, in very old characters, something like the Saxon letters "SI: COMMUNETATIS: DE: LOO". This seal is apparently very old'.*

FROM Thomas Bond *Topographical and Historical Sketches of the Boroughs of East and West Looe*, 1823.

ABOVE – St. Michael's Mount in Cornwall and illustrated below is its French counterpart.



An engraving of Mont Saint-Michel, Normandy.  
FROM *The Pictorial History of England*, 1846.



In the *History of the Kings of Britain* by the writer Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1100-c.1155), there is an Arthurian reference to a woman named Elen, niece of King Hywel of Brittany, being buried near the French namesake of this British island, Mont Saint-Michel off the Normandy coast to which the Cornish priory was made subordinate following the Norman Conquest. The old name for the French location was Tumbelaine, meaning Helen's Rock. The relevance of these two names, Elen and Helen, will become apparent in the next couple of chapters in this book, since both are central characters in the tangled tales of the mystery surrounding the *Welsh Cross*. There has prevailed a long-standing historic conflation between these two women, but more on that when we come to attempt to unravel this fusion of personalities by examining what little information has survived from their era of the 4th-century and later.

The Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans were certainly trading in the metal markets of Celtic Britain, and the Greek historian Herodotus (c.484-425 BC) described this trade in his work. And as a more recent writer claimed, so too were the Jews, suggested by the abundance of place names and the like in Cornwall that amplify this apparent connection. In his *History of Cornwall*, published at the beginning of the 19th-century, the Cornish churchman Richard Polwhele (1760-1838) illustrates that the supposed connection may date to the early Roman occupation of Britain: *'The oldest smelting-places are called "Jews' Houses," the old blocks of tin occasionally found are called "Jews' Pieces," and the stream works of tin that have been formerly deserted by the labourers are called "Jews' Works"'. Polwhele goes on to say, 'that the Jews very early worked our mines, is agreed, on all hands; but when they came hither we cannot say: Carew [antiquary born 1555] intimates, that they were introduced into Cornwall by the Flavian family'.*<sup>3</sup>

The mention here of the Flavian family refers to the Roman imperial dynasty that included the emperors Vespasian (imperial reign 69-79 AD), and his sons Titus (79-81) and Domitian (81-96). Vespasian was declared emperor whilst near Palestine, planning to suppress yet another Jewish revolt, and he left Titus to finish things off. It was this ruthless member of the Flavian dynasty who razed

*And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green:*

*And was the holy Lamb of God,*

*On England's  
pleasant pastures  
seen! And did the*

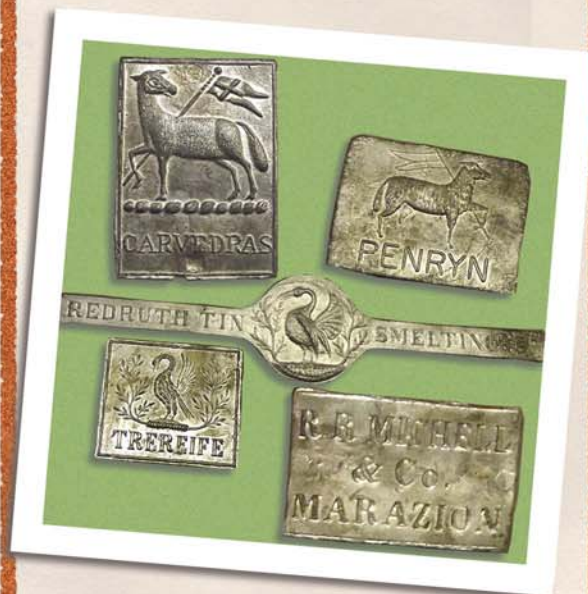
*Countenance  
Divine, Shine  
forth upon our  
clouded hills?*

*And was Jerusalem  
builded here,  
Among these dark  
Satanic Mills?*



William Blake (1757-1827)

PORTRAIT FROM  
*The Grave, A Poem*  
by Robert Blair 1808



The folk-memory of Joseph of Arimathea and Jesus visiting Cornwall was already many centuries old when the London-based poet and artist William Blake penned his lines about 'ancient time'. Blake must have been aware of the Cornish legends to have written his otherwise mysterious account. Tin ingots from the smelting houses of Cornwall utilised the image of the 'holy Lamb of God' (Jesus) and also the pelican for smelters' marks. Both derived from Christian iconography, the pelican symbolising Christ's self-sacrifice. Joseph also became the patron saint of tin miners.

COLLECTION Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro.



Jerusalem in the year 70 with such devastating consequences, initiating what became known as the Jewish Diaspora, when many people fled the Holy Land seeking safety and a better life. As well they might since Jewish rebel captives were being crucified wholesale, following a successful siege by the Romans. Having fomented rebellion against Rome they were classed as enemies of the state and crucified according to the prevailing law.

Cornwall's St. Michael's Mount is opposite to the village of Marazion, the name of which has a profusion of contentious interpretations. Citing a charter from Elizabethan times, a book published in 1801 noted that Marazion was described as a '*town of great antiquity*'. This study goes on to say that Jews '*held an annual market for selling various commodities and purchasing tin*' and that a particular spot carries the '*name "August Rock" from the month, it is said, in which the Jews resorted to this coast and held their yearly market*'.<sup>4</sup> The name given in the charter of 1595 is '*Marghasiewe*', while an earlier charter of incorporation dates to 1257 in the reign of Henry III, and like other old documents it presents another spelling variation along similar lines. Nowadays the Cornish name ('*Marghas Yow*') is interpreted as meaning 'Thursday Market', probably originating from a charter granted in the 11th-century by William the Conqueror's half-brother Count Robert, Cornwall's major land-holder following the Norman Conquest. He granted the priory on St. Michael's Mount the right to hold a market on Thursdays, and given the tidal and terrain challenges of the mount itself, the coastal site of Marazion would have proved a more convenient location for the priory's trading activities.

The inclusion of the word-element 'Zion' (Jerusalem's citadel) in the present spelling of the village's name may have arisen in the reign of Edward IV (from 1461 to 1483), when the king granted this Cornish territory and its income to Syon Monastery, located on the River Thames in the county of Middlesex. In his study of the *Parochial Antiquities of Cornwall* (1838), Davies Gilbert says that in the 11th-century *Domesday Book* the village's name is recorded as '*Tremarastol, which signifies the market-town-of-the-monastery*'<sup>5</sup>, although here the writer is referring to the Benedictine priory on St Michael's Mount nearby, rather than the one in Middlesex. A somewhat questionable suggestion appears in Jago's *An English-Cornish Dictionary* (1887), where the author offers the words '*sian*' and '*zian*' as indicating a sea-shore in Cornish. Regardless of the etymology of this village's name, it remains perfectly plausible that 1st-century Jews were trading for tin in the area, just as other traders from the eastern Mediterranean were doing so over two thousand years ago. They all needed it to make bronze and the rich tin deposits of Cornwall were of equal interest to the Romans and their appointed metal traders.

Returning to Joseph of Arimathea, we find ourselves drawn towards the possibility that his role in metal trading brought him into regular contact with Celtic Britain, as observed by Jenner in his study of Christian symbolism: '*Cornish traditional saying, "Joseph was in the tin-trade", suggests a reason why St. Joseph should come to Britain, and one of the legends grouped round the saying makes mention of an earlier visit, when Our Lord, as a boy, and His Mother, were of his company.*'<sup>6</sup> This remarkable piece of ancient folk-memory is embodied in the corporate image of the Cornish community of East Looe, depicting an adult and a youth afloat in a ship, as shown on page 12. As to when this particular imagery was first introduced there are no records, although it is widely regarded as being very ancient.

Joseph, believed by some to be the uncle of Jesus, by others his brother, was to play a pivotal role in protecting the holy family from persecution. Afterall, they were closely related to an executed enemy of the Roman state, and a disruptive new faith was not welcome in that part of the Roman Empire. This was particularly the case in its unstable province of Judea, where even the general populace seemed far from welcoming towards Jesus and the ideas he had been promulgating. The Sanhedrin wasted no time in seeking to round-up the followers of Jesus, with Saul of Tarsus (later to reinvent himself as the apostle Paul) demonstrating a considerable enthusiasm for the task in hand. The first victim of this zealous persecution was Stephen, who had been preaching throughout Jerusalem, where the gate that still bears his name was the location of his being stoned to death. Clearly, Jerusalem was not a safe place to be, but then the Roman





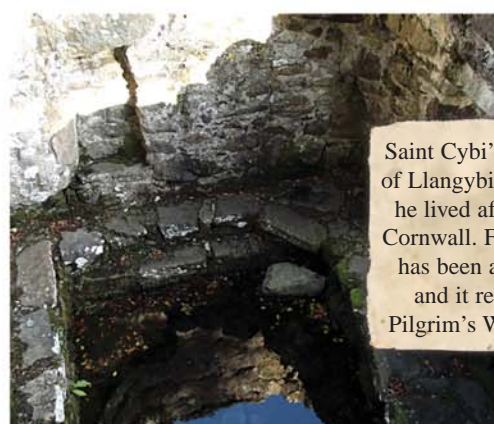


Benedictine monk Bede remarked that the Britons' Celtic Church '*preferred their own traditions before all the churches in the world*', reflecting a fiercely independent attitude that this Saxon monk, with his commitment to Rome, would not have approved of at the time.

Rome did what Rome had always done: sought the power of pre-eminence. Papal claims to precedence rest largely on being the traditional successor to Saint Peter, to whom Jesus gave the keys to heaven, calling him 'the rock' and handing him the brief to build the Christian Church. What better way could there be to take control than to possess the keys to somewhere everyone wants to end up beyond the grave? But there are skeletons in the key-cupboard of the early Roman Church. One in particular is the so-called *Donation of Constantine*, which purports to be a Roman imperial decree granting the pope authority over Rome and the western part of the Roman Empire. Far from being the work of the 4th-century Emperor Constantine, it turns out to be an 8th-century fake, although the devoted still claim its authenticity; such is the nature of faith. There are other examples of forgery and fabrication littering the literature of Rome's early Christian arena, many of which are included in a revelatory study published in 1999, *The Jesus Mysteries*. The authors define the motivating force behind this falsification of history thus: '*The Roman Church required a suitable history of its faith which vilified its enemies and celebrated its triumph as a sign of its God-given destiny*'.<sup>8</sup>

That Celtic Britain received the teachings of Jesus very early is attested by several sources. For example, the 3rd-century priest and theologian Sabellius declared that the word 'Christian' first appeared in Britain, where it was used amongst the disciples of Jesus. Described as the 'founder of western theology', Tertullian of Carthage, writing around the year 200, stated that Christianity had previously been flourishing in parts of Britain '*inaccessible to the Romans*'. Where precisely he had in mind has been a bone of contention ever since, with ecclesiastical historians endlessly chewing on the bare bones of truth. One such was a 16th-century priest, Richard Broughton. In his *Ecclesiastical Historie of Great Britaine* (1633) he writes about Joseph of Arimathea's arrival in Britain with a tantalisingly brief reference to North Wales: '*he must needs land about the North of this island, from whence coming to Glastebury [sic.] he came by the parts now called Northe-wales.*'<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, Broughton does not provide a citation for this intriguing statement about the Holy Family's first landing in Britannia.

Earlier leading figures of the Roman Church grudgingly acknowledged the ancient pedigree of the Celtic Church. Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea (260-340) and Saint Hilary of Poitiers (c.300-c.368) both wrote about the apostolic missions to Britain. It may be worth noting that the church by Marazion in Cornwall (see map on page 12) is dedicated to Saint Hilary, as is a 14th-century church in South Wales. Another Cornish link appears in connection with the Celtic Saint Cybi, said to have been the son of a king of Cornwall, so devout in his Christian mission that he declined the throne on the death of his father. A Welsh place-name on Holy Island, adjacent to Anglesey, is called Caer Gybi and he is also known and celebrated at Llangybi in Gwynedd. The word Caer means fort, the C in Cybi having mutated to a G in Welsh in this context. The fort was of Roman origin and is thought to date to the late 300s. Saint Cybi himself is stated<sup>10</sup> to have been born around 485 and he received the fort as a gift from Maelgwn Gwynedd, a pre-eminent king among the western Britons (later designated 'Welsh') who died around 547. Maelgwn's later years were, therefore, spent during King Arthur's era.



Saint Cybi's Well in the village of Llangybi in Gwynedd, where he lived after his arrival from Cornwall. For many centuries it has been a focus of devotion and it remains on today's Pilgrim's Way in North Wales.

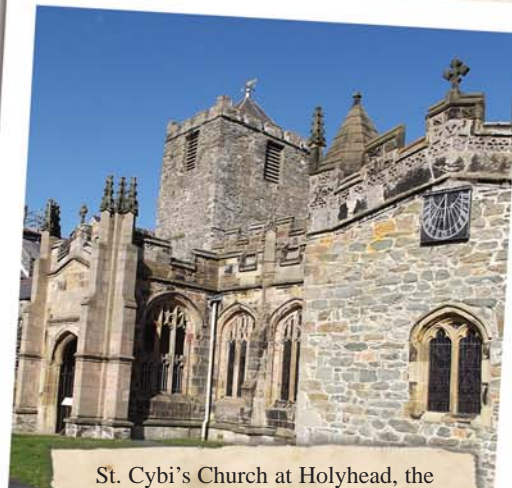


The 6th-century British cleric Gildas, who described Maelgwn Gwynedd as *'the dragon of the island'*, stated in his *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* (*On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain*, written c.540) that Christianity was introduced into Britain by Joseph of Arimathea, the year calculated from his statements being 36 or 37. Gildas declared that Christianity reached Britain when Tiberius was emperor of Rome (from years 14 to 37) and he casually remarks *'as we know'*, perhaps implying that it was virtually common knowledge in his day. The new religion's arrival was, therefore, only some seven years before the invasion under emperor Claudius, so Britain had yet to be 'accessed' by the Romans, as Tertullian observed. In any event, the conquest of Britain was inevitably a slow process, the Britons initially being no more welcoming than they had been to Julius Caesar in 55-54 BC. His claim, *'Veni, Vidi, Vici'* (I came, I saw, I conquered) was ridiculed on his return to Rome, paraphrased by satirists, particularly from Pompey's party in the Triumvirate. The poison-pens of Caesar's enemies transformed his bold assertion into 'I came, I saw, but failed to stay'.

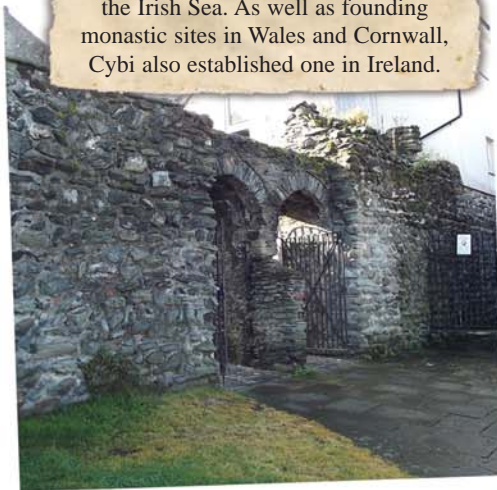
From early on Christian Rome was never entirely comfortable with the antiquity of the Celtic Church. Christian Britons were basking in the first light of 'The Way' while back in Rome the followers of Jesus were being thrown to the lions to entertain its citizens. Needless to say, the early arrival of Christianity in Britain has been the source of vexation among romano-centric churchmen and scholars alike, with some historians barely able to contain themselves over the question, as one Victorian doctor of divinity grumbled: *'Hence a flood of fictions as to the origin of Christianity in our island was poured forth. Few names of note belonging to the early age of the church failed to find some one by whom their pretensions to the ancient honour were urged. Almost every writer offered a new invention'*.<sup>11</sup>

In the 590s Pope Gregory briefed the Benedictine monk Augustine to head a mission to Britain for conversion purposes in the pagan Anglo-Saxon south east. Gregory was informed in a letter from his missionary that he had discovered a church dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus, describing it as dating from the time of the original disciples. Unfortunately for history he did not give a very precise location, merely adding that it was a royal island. As is well known, the Somerset town of Glastonbury lays claim to being the scene of the first British church, and its claimed associations with Joseph of Arimathea are equally famous.

Has folk-memory been superseded by more pressing demands of later centuries? Somerset's wet lands would have produced natural islands through seasonally raised water levels, and some argue that the name of the area derives from *Sumorsaete*, meaning the land of the summer folk. Others say that the name of the county is derived from it being *'the country of the seomere-saetan, the "dwellers by the sea-lakes"'*.<sup>12</sup> This landscape was obviously not a popular spot in the wetter periods of the year, so would this have been an ideal location to build Britain's first church? Would Augustine have regarded such variable terrain as truly islands in the more familiar sense of the word? And what, if anything, was *royal* about this marshy landscape in Somerset?

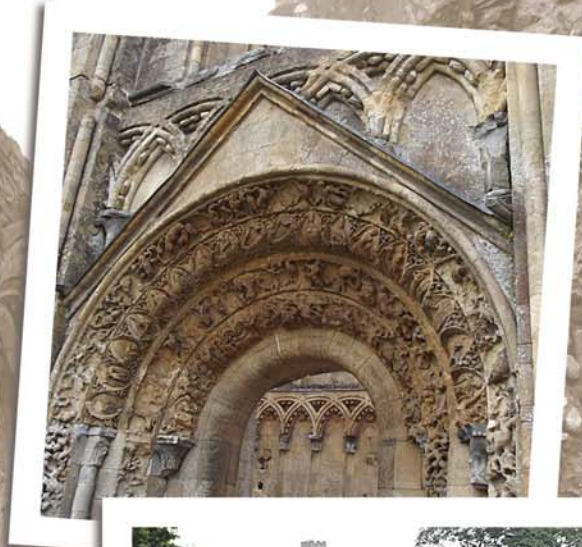


St. Cybi's Church at Holyhead, the burial place in 1195 of Prince Rhodri of Gwynedd, Lord of Anglesey. The church is surrounded by the remains of the walled Roman fort, which overlooked the Irish Sea. As well as founding monastic sites in Wales and Cornwall, Cybi also established one in Ireland.





# GLASTONBURY ABBEY



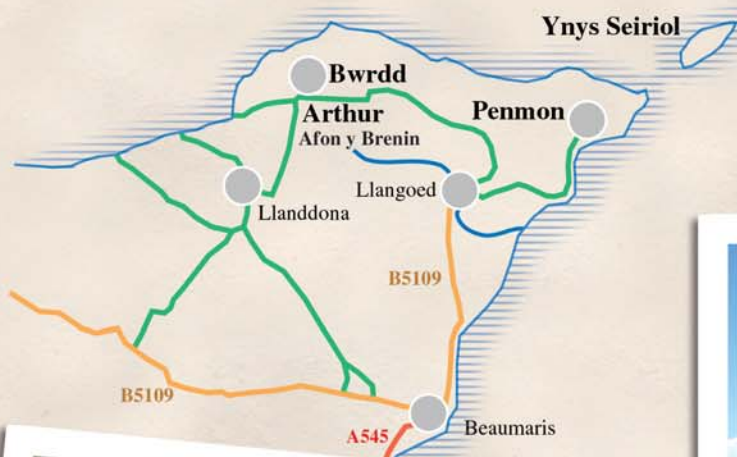
The foundation of Glastonbury Abbey in Somerset is said to date from the 7th-century and it was substantially enlarged in the 10th-century, with further buildings and modifications later – illustrated by the model. After the Norman Conquest the *Domesday Book* was compiled in 1086 to provide King William I with details about what his new realm was worth. At that time Glastonbury Abbey was very wealthy. Below is pictured the tomb effigy of one of the abbots, probably dated to the 13th-century. Above right is a picture of St. Michael's Tower on Glastonbury Tor, where the last abbot, Richard Whiting, was hanged, drawn and quartered in 1539. He had remained loyal to the Church of Rome and Henry VIII regarded this as high treason.





Much of what we see today at Penmon is from the 12th-century and later, but its Celtic roots in the Dark Ages are reflected in the 10th-century monumental stone crosses, like the one pictured below. As can be seen in the photograph, this cross has been assembled from parts of others in ancient times. Saint Seiriol, who was of the Welsh Blood Royal, founded a small monastic community here with the support of King Maelgwn Gwynedd, who is said to have been buried on Ynys Seiriol. This places events in the Arthurian era and the place-name of Bwrdd Arthur (Arthur's Table) is called Rownd Table Hill on Speed's map from 1610 (right). From its southern slopes runs Afon y Brenin, which means River of the King. Saint Seiriol was a great friend of Saint Cybi, who was based at Holyhead, and tradition says they would meet up in the centre of Anglesey.

## Penmon Priory



A mysterious stone head of a bearded figure is on display at Penmon Priory and he is seen clutching a double-headed hammer, the attribute of the Norse god Thor. This artefact probably dates to Anglesey's occupation by Norsemen from whom the island derives its name. Also on display is this enamel plaque (far right), the holes suggesting that it was once attached to a reliquary.



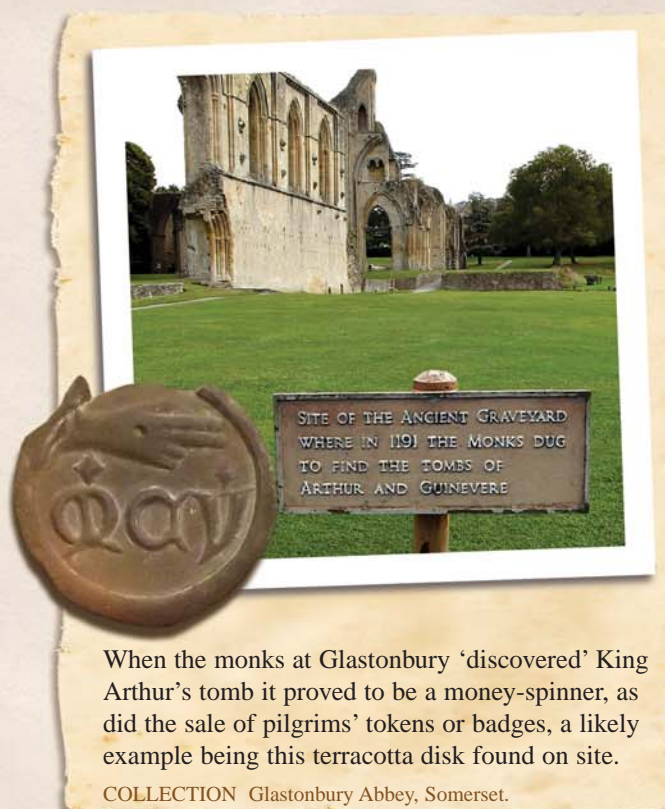


Glastonbury Abbey's claim to being a proto-Christian foundation was thought to rest squarely on the shoulders of William of Malmesbury, a monk from Wiltshire who was commissioned to write the abbey's history, *The Antiquity of the Church of Glastonbury*. Modern scholarship casts a suspicious light on the credibility of the text as we find it today. Recent research<sup>13</sup> has shown that William's original work was subsequently interpolated many times, these alterations and additions by later writers starting after the abbey's fire in 1184. Undaunted by anything resembling scruples, the abbey's monkish 'editors' had by around 1230 considerably reworked the text. By 1247 a new chapter one was added and a substantially revised chapter two, all done so as to incorporate the growing and widespread interest in the Holy Grail, a subject that was increasingly being developed by Arthurian Romance writers in Europe at the time. William of Malmesbury himself did not, therefore, claim that Glastonbury was the site of Avalon.

The legend of the Holy Grail came to be associated with Joseph's arrival in Britain, with, we are told, the blood of Christ contained in a chalice. This was to turn into the 'best-seller' of the Middle Ages, with the monks of Glastonbury Abbey growing fat on the royalties, as it were. Confronted with the disastrous fire at the abbey in 1184, the abbot and his team made a 'miraculous discovery' a few years later: nothing less than the actual grave of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere (from Welsh *Gwenhwyfar*, meaning white-holy-magical). King Henry II of England (reign 1154-1189) granted a charter of renovation to Glastonbury Abbey, referring to it as '*founded by the disciples of our Lord themselves*'. So he was led to believe. At that time King Arthur mania was captivating the chivalric nobility of England and Europe, and such relics as these were seriously big business. Pilgrims – royals and commoners alike – poured into Glastonbury with their purses rattling, eventually making the abbey both rich and powerful. No doubt Rome took its usual percentage.

The monks of Glastonbury were certainly not averse to telling barefaced lies if it suited their purpose. The abbot was even rebuked by the pope for their duplicity in claiming to have the remains of the 10th-century Saint Dunstan, whose corpse was actually at Canterbury in Kent. The motive for all this devious fabrication was simply to increase the abbey's income through pilgrimage and donations, and the money certainly swelled its coffers over the centuries. Offerings made to relics remained a particularly lucrative activity, and those associated with Joseph of Arimathea were especially popular with pilgrims. A description of Glastonbury's relics from 1586 mentions that the abbey had a nail from the crucifixion of Jesus, the claim being that it '*had been brought into England by St. Joseph of Arimathea*',<sup>14</sup> and thereafter it had remained at Glastonbury. It never seems to have occurred to anyone to wonder why Joseph would have wanted such a gruesome reminder of a loved-one's tortuous execution, let alone some of Christ's blood in a cup.

In his book *The Marian Conspiracy*, Graham Phillips – the modern writer previously mentioned – constructs a highly plausible scenario, showing that rather than the well-known Somerset town of Glastonbury being proto-Christian, the royal island location is actually Anglesey. Obviously, this is not the place to recount the complex and extensive findings which are explored in that book, a fascinating detective account that finds the author travelling from the Holy Land to Wales in search of the destiny of the family of Jesus. Nevertheless, the work does present a fascinating hypothesis.



When the monks at Glastonbury 'discovered' King Arthur's tomb it proved to be a money-spinner, as did the sale of pilgrims' tokens or badges, a likely example being this terracotta disk found on site.

COLLECTION Glastonbury Abbey, Somerset.



## THE SOUND OF THE FURIES

Anglesey is attacked by Rome circa 60AD

“Paulinus Suetonius resolved to subdue the isle of Mona; a place inhabited by a warlike people, and a common refuge for all the discontented Britons.

On the opposite shore stood the Britons, close embodied, and prepared for action. Women were seen rushing through the ranks in wild disorder: their apparel funereal; their hair loose to the wind; in their hands flaming torches; and their whole appearance resembling the frantic rage of the Furies. The Druids were ranged in order, with hands uplifted, invoking the gods, and pouring forth horrible imprecations.

While Suetonius was employed in making his arrangements to secure the island he received intelligence that Britain had revolted, and that the whole province was up in arms.”

TACITUS ~ 1st-century AD



Quote from *The Annals of Imperial Rome*.  
Translation from the Latin by Arthur Murphy in  
*Tacitus*, published in 1831.

Photographs illustrating the Romano-British period  
are of a re-enactment group in North Wales.

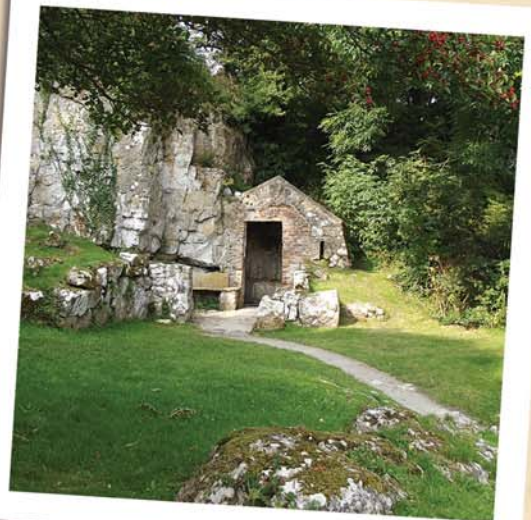


Anglesey was where the royal house of Gwynedd operated from at their palace of Aberffraw, and it is worth noting that Gwynedd means the White Land (Welsh *Y Wynedd*): 'Lord of Aberffraw – Great chief of our fair, white land and its adornment'.<sup>15</sup> The White Land is a recurring place-name in the Arthurian Romances of the Middle Ages. These works claim that Joseph of Arimathea built his chapel in the White Land, a descriptive name more suited to the area of Gwynedd known in English as Snowdonia (Welsh *Eryri*) than the wet land of the Somerset Levels. So, was Arthur of the Britons hijacked into the myth-making machinery of the Anglo-Normans, providing a pedigree framework that met the political needs of their post-conquest era? Even today Arthur is spoken of as an *English* king, albeit as probably mythological given the paucity of records to confirm his existence one way or the other. Arthur was actually fighting against the 'English' in the form of Anglo-Saxon invaders in the post-Roman era.

The name Anglesey is thought to be derived from Old Norse, reflecting the influence of Viking raiders towards the close of the first millennium. It is not, as one may suppose, anything to do with the Angles, the Germanic people whose name is recorded in England (Angleland) in locations like East Anglia. The island's name is believed to relate to an obscure Norse chieftain by the name of Ongli, hence Onglisey or Ongli's Isle. During King Arthur's era of the 6th-century, a monastic cell was founded at Penmon (illustrated on page 19) in eastern Anglesey by the Briton Saint Seiriol, who expanded the Christian settlement onto the nearby small island of Ynys Seiriol (Seiriol's Island), known also by its Viking name of Priestholm. This island became a major site of pilgrimage, attracting many Scandinavian visitors who had settled in Ireland, as recorded in the 12/13th-century *History of Gruffydd ap Cynan*, a Dublin-born king of Gwynedd from 1081 until his death in 1137. Originally founded around the year 540, the priory at Penmon was dedicated to Mary and it is a location rich in early Christian traditions. The 12th-century Welsh court poet, Gwalchmai ap Meilyr from Anglesey uses the phrase '*Holy Gwynedd*' in his poem praising rulers of North Wales. Regrettably, he does not go on to expand upon this all too brief designation.

Anglesey is called Ynys Mon by the Welsh and while the Ynys part means island, the Mon element is far less certain and has attracted all manner of interpretations over the years, without necessarily forming a satisfactory conclusion. For example, a 19th-century writer speculated that, '*Mon implies what is alone, separate or detached, and, accordingly, properly applied to an island.*'<sup>16</sup> Julius Caesar referred to it as Mona in his writings on the wars in Gaul, but here again there is some uncertainty as to whether he was referring to the Isle of Man further north. It was another Roman, the 1st-century AD senator and historian Tacitus who recorded Anglesey as a stronghold of the druidic religion, and his writings provide a vivid account of the imperial troops' assault on the island, as illustrated in the quotation from his writings on the page opposite. Clearly, the Britons were not overly keen on Roman rule.

## St. Seiriol's Well PENMON





In exploring the historic name of Ynys Mon it may be worth reconsidering the long-standing Welsh epithet for Anglesey of 'Mon Mam Cymru' – meaning this place is the Mother of Wales. During a late 12th-century recruitment drive for the crusades, the archdeacon of Brecon, Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales c.1146-1223) observed that, '*when the crops have been defective in all other parts of the country, this island, from the richness of its soil and abundant produce, has been able to supply all Wales*'.<sup>17</sup>

The striking improbability of Gerald's assertion should be obvious. Perhaps Anglesey's descriptive title derives not from the rather weakly concocted notion relating to the fertility of the soil there, as many have accepted, but rather from the folk-memory of a very special mother (Welsh *mam*), Mary the mother of Jesus. Maybe the fertility suggestion is more of a cryptic metaphor for the fecund quality of motherhood, rather than the gritty stuff in which crops are planted. As one observer remarked, in a collection of letters (published in 1770) from a tour of Wales: '*A considerable part of Carnarvonshire and the island of Anglesey, is naturally a very good soil, but very much unimproved*'.<sup>18</sup> There is no scientifically-sound reason to suppose that the soil in Anglesey is any more fertile than fields across the Menai Strait in neighbouring Gwynedd, referred to in the quote by the old county name of 'Carnarvonshire'. In actual fact, 20th-century research<sup>19</sup> shows that cereal cultivation was equally productive in the Lleyn Peninsula on mainland Gwynedd, so there is no realistic reason to identify Anglesey as the granary of Wales.

Another 18th-century writer, the antiquary Francis Grose, also recounted the far-fetched story of Anglesey's claimed ability to '*produce cattle and corn sufficient to feed all Wales*', going on to quote another old Caernarfonshire saying in his book of 1790: '*Snowdon will yield sufficient pasture for all the cattle of Wales put together*'.<sup>20</sup> This all amounts to a rather baffling level of exaggeration, but to what end? There is an abundance of grazing and highly productive arable land throughout Wales, the many lowlands offering plenty of good quality farmland. So why would Anglesey be singled out in this obscure way? The poet Taliesin, who flourished in the 6th-century, refers in one of his poems to Anglesey as '*Mon of the generous bowls*'. This is more likely to be in allusion to the generous feasting at a Gwynedd royal court than a comment on Anglesey itself, since court poets were much given to flattering their hosts in the pursuit of patronage for their literary talents. And a feast or two.

Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicle* from the 16th-century makes a passing reference to Anglesey, '*which is as a nurse to the Welshmen*'.<sup>21</sup> What did the English chronicler mean by this vague mention? In his day the word nurse would have indicated someone who nourishes in a maternal sense (the nursery of childhood), rather than its more modern usage of someone undertaking medical services. Alternatively, if we return momentarily to the Arthurian legends and a potential connection with Anglesey, we learn that after being mortally wounded Arthur is transported to the Isle of Avalon for medical treatment. A Welsh woman who will prominently feature in this book may hold the key to understanding Holinshed's rather ambivalent use of the word nurse. She is known as Saint Elen of Caernarfon and is said to have founded a hospice for the sick in Anglesey around the late 300s. So, we are left to ponder when and how these one-time meaningful associations arose in the ancient kingdom of Gwynedd and its *royal island* of Anglesey.

The 'explanations' about cattle and corn may simply have arisen in the early Middle Ages, when to account for what was already obscure by then, writers went for what struck them as the obvious translation and interpretation. By the 17th-century Anglesey's maternal status in Welsh folk-memory induced the famous cartographer John Speed to indulge in quite flowery language. In his *Description of Britain* (1666) Speed suggested Anglesey was '*like a provident and full breasted mother*'. It is not known for certain when the expression 'Mon Mam Cymru' arose in the Welsh language, and a variation of the expression was recorded in an 18th-century antiquarian journal: '*Some do term the proverb thus, Mon Mam Wynedd, that is Mon the Mother of North Wales*'.<sup>22</sup> Here 'Wynedd' is referring to the ancient kingdom of Gwynedd that occupied most of northern Wales, rather than the smaller, present-day administrative county.

The antiquary from Anglesey, Henry Rowlands (1655-1723), probably offered the most illuminating explanation in his influential book published in 1723, *Mona Antiqua Restaurata*. Rowlands was a clergyman



and he likened the use of mam, or mother, in connection with Anglesey to its use within the Christian tradition. For example, Canterbury would be the ‘mother church’ within England’s Anglican communion, just as a certain monastery would have been titled the mother house in relation to several other, more subordinate institutions of the same monastic order, known as daughter houses. Rowlands expands his insightful argument by saying how Anglesey was a European centre of druidic learning amongst the pagan Celts, thereby making the Welsh island the ‘mother’ location of their pre-Christian religion. ‘Mon Mam Cymru’ remains a mysterious piece of folk-memory.

Returning to Augustine, who was to become the first archbishop of Canterbury, he was neither tactful nor sensitive in his dealings with the independently-minded British Church; this prelate was as romano-centric as one could get. While history tends to focus on differences of opinion regarding the dating of Easter and such trivia as hairstyles – the monks’ tonsure – the underlying issue was one of a lack of understanding and respect towards the Britons. Here were a people whose conversion to Christianity stemmed from direct contact with the disciples; and *perhaps* even Jesus himself during Joseph of Arimathea’s metal-trading trips to Britain. Writing in the 1130s, Geoffrey of Monmouth says Augustine actually incited the soldiers to attack the unyielding Celtic churchmen, resulting in the massacre of many monks at Bangor is - Coed, near the town of Wrexham in North Wales. Those who survived the slaughter are said to have fled to the safety of Bardsey Island off the Gwynedd coast. Augustine demanded obedience to Rome and when thwarted he made a distinctly Roman response – the sword. Geoffrey’s source was the *Historia Ecclesiastica* by the 7th-century monk and chronicler Bede, who provides an account of this incident that took place circa the year 613. Bede’s narrative reflects his own romano-centricity where he describes how King Aethelfrith of Bernicia

MAP – Samuel Lewis 1830.



MAP – Thomas Kitchin 1755.





(Northumbria) led an army of Angles against the 'faithless Britons', as Bede calls them, resulting in hundreds of Celtic monks perishing during this shameless tragedy.

As we near the end of the first stage of our pilgrimage, we do so under the chapter heading of 'Holy Families', and it is those of ancient Gwynedd who remain our main focus of attention, as does this kingdom for the remainder of our journey.

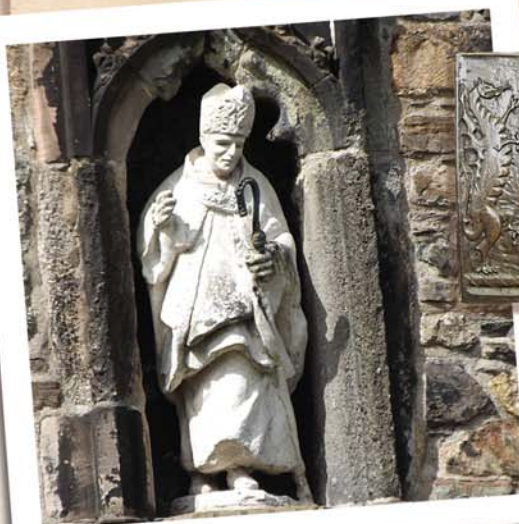
Recently the legendary 'relic' called the Holy Grail has been reinterpreted, particularly by courageous historians like the late Laurence Gardner, who was a Prior of the Celtic Church's Sacred Kindred of Saint Columba, among other distinguished roles. His work is especially focused on histories of the Blood Royal, a task to which he was well-qualified as an internationally respected

sovereign and chivalric genealogist. In Gardner's book, *Bloodline of the Holy Grail*,<sup>23</sup> the author demonstrates how the royal house of Gwynedd (said to have been founded by Cunedda in the middle 400s) is descended from the daughter of Joseph of Arimathea, Anna, who married Bran the Blessed in the 1st-century. In a Welsh scholarly journal from 1828, we read: 'In one copy of the *Triads* [historic Welsh records], preserved in the *Hengwrt* collection, these families are thus spoken of:- "The three sacred lineages of Britain; that of Bran, the son of Llyr; that of Cunedda, the potentate; and that of Brychan, of Brecknock." The family of Bran is said to have been instrumental of first introducing Christianity into this island'.<sup>24</sup>

There is a watercourse in Anglesey called Nant y Fran, which could translate into English as the Stream of Bran, the B having mutated in Welsh to an F in this context. Less romantically defined, it could equally be named after a bird from the crow family, known in Welsh as bran. Both crows and streams are plentiful enough in Wales, so why would this place be singled out if not for some other, now lost significance? A related linguistic dilemma arises elsewhere in North Wales, this time in the Vale of Llangollen where a ruined medieval castle, called in Welsh Castell Dinas Bran (opposite page), is perched on a hilltop. A modern translation of the name could be Castle of the City of Crows, but this does not make a lot of sense. Din or Dinas would, in the past, have signified a fortified place. An Iron Age settlement predated the present castle, and this site is identified as the Grail Castle in the recent Arthurian studies of Steve Blake and Scott Lloyd.<sup>25</sup>

To summarise, we may consider that just as the name Arthur has its linguistic origins in relation to the Celtic word for a bear, then it is not so surprising that other personal names relate to animals. It is, for example, a practice familiar to us today from individual name usage within the tribes of the native people of

## Massacre of Monks at Bangor is-Coed



The independent Welsh monastery paid a heavy price when confronted by Augustine and his military support. Today no trace remains of where it stood and the village near Wrexham is now known as Bangor-on-Dee

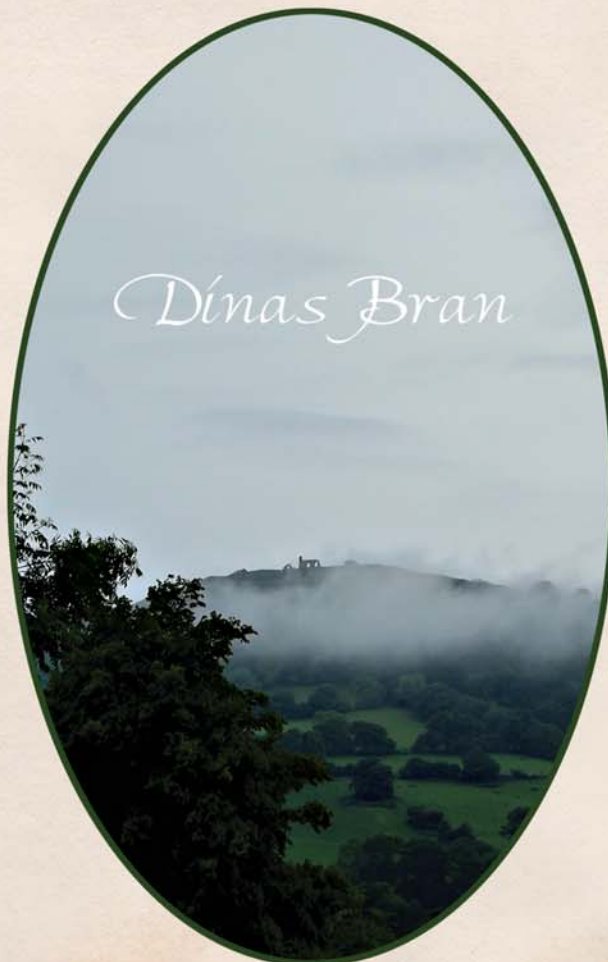


North America, as portrayed in popular culture. And just as personal names hint at us from the past so also do place-names, but here too we are left with only folk-memory. In a study titled the *Holy Wells of Wales* <sup>26</sup> from the 1950s, the author describes those dedicated to the mother of Jesus, saying that there are some seventy-six of her wells found in Wales. He goes on to say that there are traditions that Mary actually visited Britain, one of the folk-memories recalling that she landed by sea at Llanfair near Harlech, where an old church (right) is dedicated to her. The 'fair' part of this village's name is derived from Mair, the Welsh for Mary, the M having mutated to an F in this context. In the year 1188 Baldwin, the Archbishop of Canterbury and his companion Gerald spent the night in Saint Mary's church at Llanfair on their journey through Wales. The immediate area here is certainly well-endowed with old churches, as another traveller noted in his *Tours in Wales (1804-1813)*, where he quaintly says that, '*churches are thickly sown here*'.<sup>27</sup>



Llanfair Church

This all serves to illustrate the stubborn presence of folk-memory, a source we shall return to in some detail as we continue this quest for our particular treasure – the *Welsh Cross*. This relic of the True Cross was to prove equally enchanting for medieval Welsh and English kings alike. Its journey through history is the narrative path that lies ahead, turning next to the 3rd-century when Rome and the Holy Land combined once more to create a fabulous story. There was neither Wales nor England at the time, just the Roman province of Britannia and its tribal lands and people – the Britons – speaking the ancestral language of the Welsh.







**CONSTANTINE**





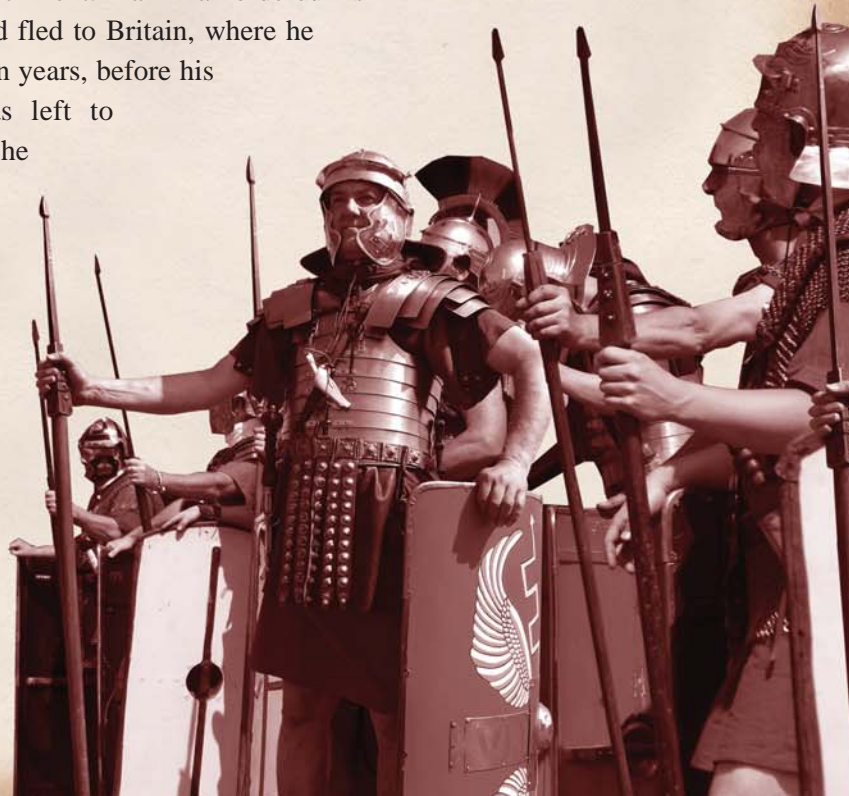
he next leg of our journey through history in search of the *Welsh Cross* finds us in the Roman Empire of the 3rd-century AD, encountering the man commonly known as Constantius Chlorus. Scholars continue to debate his background: was he of noble lineage or humble origins? Either way, he certainly rose through the Roman army ranks with remarkable success, becoming a military tribune and then governor of the province of Dalmatia on the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea.

The Roman Empire at that time was even more fraught with division than usual. In 286 Diocletian (in power 285 until 305) was struggling to rule what had become the largest empire the world had ever seen, and as a result he elevated a friend from the army, Maximian to become co-emperor. The power sharing plan was that Maximian would run things in the western provinces, while Diocletian held the reigns of power in the east of the empire. It was the beginning of a division that was to have lasting consequences for the cohesion of Rome's hard-won territorial acquisitions.

Meanwhile, Constantius continued to make a name for himself, becoming praetorian prefect in the west and leading wars against the troublesome Germanic tribes across the rivers Rhine and Danube. In a politically shrewd move that seems somewhat heartless, he set aside his then partner Helen around 289 and married Maximian's daughter, Theodora, with whom Constantius had five children. Things were certainly hotting-up in the Roman empire in the 290s, as suspicion and enmity developed between the east and west power brokers. So much so, that another new power sharing arrangement was devised, becoming known as the Tetrarchy, meaning four rulers. Diocletian agreed that the two halves should each be ruled by an Augustus – in effect what was already an emperor – but with the significant difference that each would have a deputy called a Caesar, the two of whom would have a right of succession to the top job on the death of the Augustus in their half of the empire.

Appointed Western Caesar in 293, Constantius had a territorial portfolio which included the Celtic provinces of Britain, Gaul and also Spain, and he set up his capital at Trier, referred to as 'Belgian Rome' in what is now Germany. One of the biggest challenges that confronted Constantius was that caused by the usurper Carausius, who had been appointed commander of the Roman fleet by Maximian. In the 280s the problem of Saxon and Frankish pirates around the coasts of Britain and northern Gaul was so severe that the Boulogne-based fleet was patrolling and attacking them on a regular basis. Under the command of Carausius this naval patrol was successful, especially in acquiring the ill-gotten gains of these pirates. However, instead of handing over this booty to the Roman authorities of the provinces, Carausius took it upon himself to enlarge his fleet instead. Inevitably this did not go down well with Maximian, who was even told that Carausius was collaborating with pirates to his personal enrichment. Maximian ordered his execution but Carausius got wind of the plan and fled to Britain, where he declared himself emperor and ran things for seven years, before his subordinate Allectus assassinated him. It was left to Constantius Chlorus to sort this mess out and he began the reconquest of Britain in 296, with Allectus and his many Germanic mercenaries dying in battle before Constantius achieved overall victory.

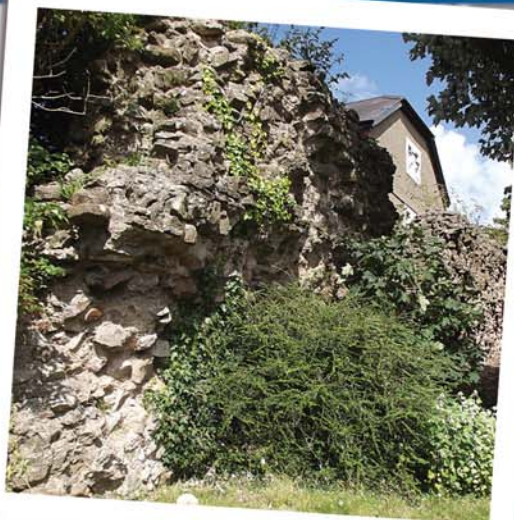
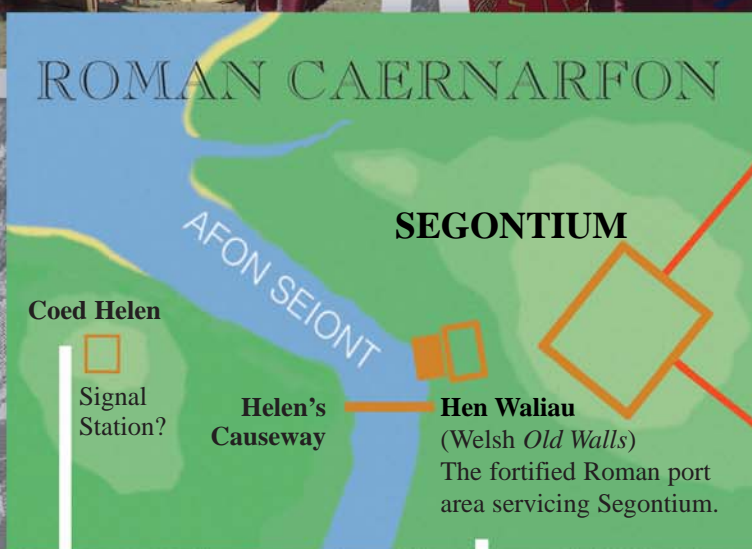
Elsewhere in the empire Constantius' counterpart in the east, Galerius (born around 260) was hungry for more power under his Augustus, Diocletian, whose persecution of Christians knew no bounds. His edicts were ultimately of limited effect in stemming the overall growth of Christianity, although they did lead to quite horrible deaths for countless people,







## ROMAN CAERNARFON





including mass crucifixions of those perceived as enemies of the state. Galerius took up the role of anti-Christian persecutor with relish. On the other hand, over in the western empire Constantius displayed a remarkably, even suspiciously tolerant attitude to the followers of Jesus. He dragged his feet in implementing the anti-Christian edicts at the beginning of the 300s, according to his contemporaries. In 305 Maximian relinquished his purple cloak as Augustus and Constantius rose to the top, but his reign was to be short-lived. He died in Eboracum (England's city of York) the following year, having nominated his only son by Helen, Constantine, as his successor. The powerful legions of Britannia supported the nomination.

The next port of call in our pilgrimage is the North Wales town of Caernarfon, the name meaning fort (Welsh *Caer*) in Arfon, this being the name of the area opposite Anglesey in coastal Gwynedd, with the 'fon' element being a mutation derived from Mon – Anglesey. The Roman fort at Caernarfon is known as Segontium and the site included a Mithraeum, a temple dedicated to the deity Mithras, whose solar cult was especially popular with the military. The fort originated around 80 AD and remained occupied until about the year 394, although use of the site by the local Britons continued long after the Romans had left in the early 400s. Archaeologists have found over forty graves, probably dating from the 5th to the 7th centuries, including several of high-status individuals. The graves were roughly aligned east-west in the Christian manner. Segontium was also called *Caer Seiont* and the *Seiont* element, from the local river's name (*Afon Seiont* – the Saint's River), was, it is thought, latinised to arrive at the fort's Roman title. It has also been known in Welsh as *Caer Custent* and *Hen Gaer Custenin*, meaning the old fort of Constantine. It was known by that name when the Norman Earl Hugh of Chester set up his fortress there in the 1090s, during what ultimately became an unsuccessful attempt to control the whole of Gwynedd following the Norman Conquest of 1066.

In the late 13th-century, when King Edward I (1239-1307) of England finally conquered Gwynedd, he began building Caernarfon Castle, and his itinerary shows that he arrived in the area in April 1283 and remained until November. Edward's interest in Segontium may not have amounted to much more than seeing it as a convenient quarry of recyclable masonry for his nearby castle-building enterprise. A description in the then popular work, *The Life of Merlin* (*Vita Merlini* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, c.1150) may have proved inspirational in the innovative design of Caernarfon Castle, with its remarkable excess of lofty towers. The *Vita Merlini* says how '*Segontium and its towers and mighty palaces shall lament in ruins until the Welsh return to their former domains*'. Edward ensured that these domains eventually fell under the English Crown, much to the lamentations of the Welsh.

King Edward's lengthy stay in the area in 1283 also included a visit to *Caer Gybi* in Anglesey, where he signed and dated a letter on the 4th of August at what was termed '*Castrum Cuby*' – Cuby's Castle. Since Caernarfon Castle was little more than a building site in 1283, where the king

~ *Segontium* ~  
A Mariners' Landmark  
in the 18th-century.



It appears that King Edward I did not entirely dismantle Segontium to provide masonry for his new castle in Caernarfon at the end of the 13th-century, as is suggested by maritime charts from much later centuries.

When Lewis Morris (1701-1765) and his son William (1758-1808) of Anglesey undertook maritime surveys of the coast of Wales, the aim was to help reduce the appalling number of shipwrecks occurring on the country's rugged coastline. A variety of landmarks were included on their sea charts to aid mariners, and the one of Caernarfon Bay included Segontium, at that time evidently visible from the Menai Strait.

Chart detail from a William Morris plan published in 1801.





This detail taken from John Speed's map of 1610 shows the long lost church of 'Saint Elyn' situated close to the Roman bridge called 'Helen's Causeway'. Speed's map also includes the castle built by Edward I and the church of Saint Peblig ('Llanbeblin'), which Speed describes as a 'little church' in his *Description of Britain* (1666). He was referring to the very ancient building that was replaced in the Middle Ages.

The abandoned holy well of Saint Helen, or Elen (right), is now overgrown and quite inaccessible, but was once a site of pilgrimage for centuries, along with the ancient church which stood close by to it.

The tower at the top of Helen's Wood (Coed Helen) is shown below left, viewed from the castle, which is shown below in a model of Caernarfon as it would have looked in the late 13th-century, following the castle's completion. The new English colonial town was encircled by walls, patrolled by the garrison against a Welsh revolt.



SEGONTIUM HELEN'S CAUSEWAY COED HELEN





actually took up residence is uncertain. A handbook for tourists in North Wales from 1868 records folk-memory of a location seven miles from Caernarfon, relating to this king's visits to the area: 'From Penygroes [meaning Head of the Cross] the railway line keeps due south, passing the village of Llanllyfni. In this parish is an old house, supposed to have been built on the site of a residence of Edward I, who is asserted by tradition to have lived here in 1284'.<sup>1</sup>

There is a medieval chronicle known in Latin as *Flores Historiarum* (meaning *Flowers of History*), produced in various manuscripts and added to by different writers – invariably monks – over time, and it says for the year 1283: 'The body of that great prince, the father of the noble emperor Constantine, was discovered at Caernarvon, near Snowdon, and by command of the king [Edward I] was honourably placed in the church'.<sup>2</sup> The phrase 'great prince' is shown in the text of the original Latin chronicles as 'maximi principis', but for some inexplicable reason the historian, A. J. Taylor (1911-2002) seized on this as referring to Magnus Maximus, the usurping Roman emperor of the late 4th-century. Taylor even went so far as to misrepresent the lower case letter M of 'maximi' in the text as a capital M in a footnote in his studies of the castle-building activities of Edward I. This historian says in that footnote that, 'there is no reason to doubt the veracity of the record that what was believed to be the body of Magnus Maximus, "father of the noble emperor Constantine", was found at Caernarvon in 1283'.<sup>3</sup>

The chronicle 'record' (*Flores Historiarum*) which Taylor cites actually makes no mention of the tomb in Caernarfon as being that of Magnus Maximus, who is not known from reliable contemporary sources to have fathered an emperor called Constantine. Equally clear and explicit is a much earlier source, the 9th-century Welsh monk and historian Nennius. In his *Historia Brittonum* we read about that ancient tomb at Caernarfon and Nennius is quite unambiguous about whose tomb he believed it to be: 'Constantius, the son of Constantine the Great. He died in Britain; his sepulchre, as it appears by the inscription on his tomb, is still seen near the city named Cair segeint [Segontium]. Upon the pavement of the above-mentioned city he sowed three seeds of gold, silver, and brass, that no poor person might ever be found in it'.<sup>4</sup> The old Irish manuscript version of Nennius provides us with a slightly different account of this mystifying action by a Roman emperor: 'he left three seeds in the green of that city'.<sup>5</sup> There is no reference to precious metals in the Irish text, so the 'seeds' could, perhaps, be a metaphoric reference to off-spring, and the 'green' an allusion to fertility, as in the Green Man of Celtic folk-memory.

Precisely what was meant by the strange statement in Nennius may never be known for certain, and the more prosaic explanation is that Roman coins were regularly found in the Caernarfon area, thereby aiding the poor people who found them there. This same could be said of any major Roman settlement, so why would Caernarfon be singled out by Nennius? The problem is that the manuscript sources we have today are from the Middle Ages, so assuming someone called Nennius actually wrote the work in the 800s, the original text would have been copied many times over in the intervening centuries. Monks labouring in the scriptoria of medieval monasteries, copying out what was already a copy by someone else, may not have understood what Nennius was alluding to. They may even have mis-translated the 9th-century original text and the meaning became garbled. So with frustrating inevitability we end up with rather cryptic statements about seeds and metals in varying manuscript versions of Nennius.

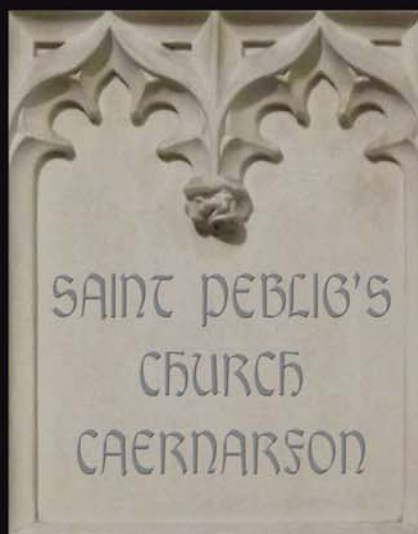
So whose tomb was actually found at Caernarfon? Surely not that of Magnus Maximus, who was executed at Aquileia in north-east Italy in 388. Nennius says it was 'Constantius, the son of Constantine the Great', but this Constantius died in 361 at Mopsuestia in what is now southern Turkey, so here again something may have been lost in translation. And if as the *Flores Historiarum* says it was 'the father of the noble emperor Constantine', then it is a case of which Emperor Constantine was intended, since there are

**B**ritannia insula aquodā bruto consule romano dicta. Hec confurgit ab affrico boreali ad occidentem versus octingentis in longitudine milibus ducentorum in latitudine spaciū habet. In ea sunt uiginti octo ciuitates: & innumera p. mōniona cū innumens castellis ex lapidib; & latere fabricatis. Et in ea habitant. m. gentes. scoti. picti. saxones. atq; brittones. Tremag-

A facsimile of a manuscript of the history by Nennius.

FROM *Nennii Historia Britonum* by Joseph Stevenson, 1838.

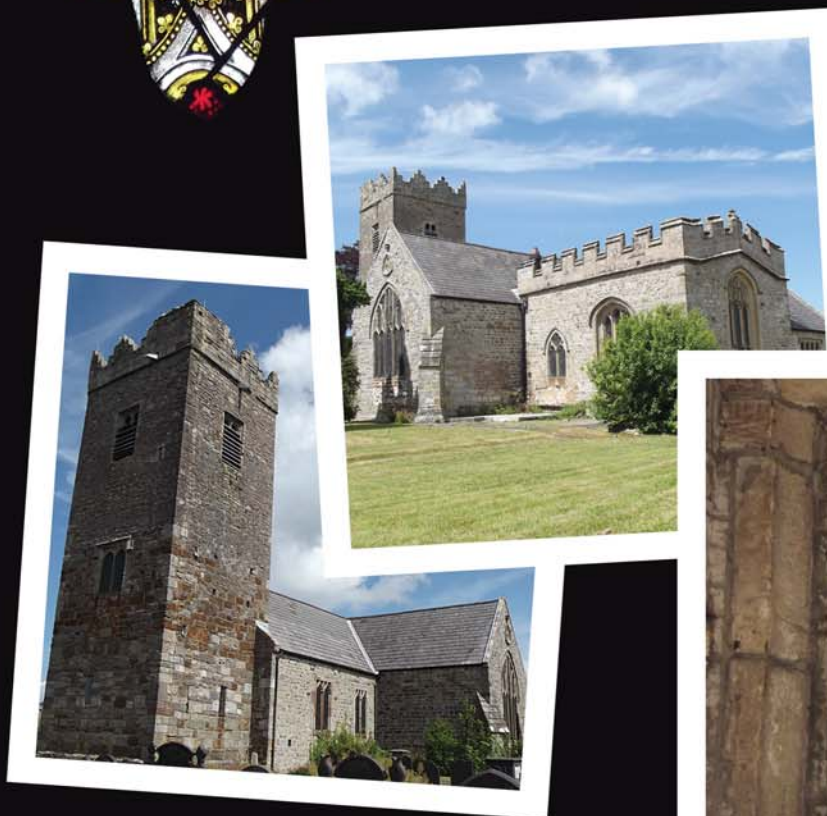




Founded in the 5th-century on the site of the Roman fort of Segontium, the original church was the Llan of Saint Peblig, the son of the emperor Magnus Maximus and his partner Elen of Caernarfon, a Welsh princess who was often confused with Saint Helen, mother of the emperor Constantine.



Below is pictured a stone carving that is said to date from the Middle Ages. Located within the church, it depicts a figure in the act of prayer. It looks like a sepulchral effigy, but is too small to have formed the lid of a medieval sarcophagus.





several candidates in the Roman and Byzantine imperial lists. If the son was Constantine the Great, then *'the father'* would have been Constantius Chlorus, but he died in York in 306 and it seems improbable that his corpse would be transported hundreds of miles to what is now North Wales for burial. Not impossible, of course, but highly unlikely, and there is no reason to suppose that this Constantius had any burning desire to be entombed in the far flung outpost of Segontium.

The emperor Constantine the Great had three sons by his wife Fausta, their names being Constans, Constantine and Constantius, all three of whom enriched themselves by acquiring imperial status, with much murder and mayhem in the fraternal process. Could they have been the *'three seeds'* in the seemingly abstruse mention in Nennius? All three sons are pictured together on a Roman coin from 338, reproduced on page 10.

In the 13th-century *History of Gruffydd ap Cynan*, who ruled Gwynedd until his death in 1137, we read: *'in the old city [Segontium] of the Emperor Constantine, son of Constans the Great.'* The anonymous writer of this history also appears to be confusing emperors, since Constans is not recorded as having had any children, before being assassinated in the year 350 in what is now south-western France. Constans is, however, recorded as visiting Britannia in 343, following a successful military campaign in Gaul. As so often happened, this profusion of similar names has led to confusion, and the writer of Gruffydd's history was working many centuries after the Romans had left Britain. Conflation of characters is a recurrent issue in this book.

The *Flores Historiarum* says that King Edward I commanded that the ancient imperial remains should be *'honourably placed in the church'*, but the name of the actual church is not mentioned in this chronicle. There are essentially two local candidates for this church, the nearest being Llanbeblig while the other could be a long-perished old church of unknown foundation that once existed near the quayside in Caernarfon, identified on John Speed's map of 1610 (see page 31) as that of *'Saint Elyn'*. This could simply be a spelling variation on the name Helen (as in Constantius' partner/Constantine's mother), although it is more likely to be expressing the Welsh personal name equivalent of Elen, who was a local 4th-century Briton who achieved saintly status in the independent Celtic Church. Where the chapel once stood was very near the site of a small Roman fort (known in Welsh as *Hen Waliau*, meaning Old Walls), the ruins of which were still visible in the 1700s. This was a fortified port area that serviced the nearby, much larger Segontium and it is briefly mentioned in another tourists' guide, published in 1821: *'Near one corner, some years ago, the foundation of a round tower was discovered; it was paved [...] there were similar ruins on the opposite shore, and within these few years, in scouring the channel of the river, large pieces of a curious old foot bridge were discovered, supposed to have been Roman.'*<sup>6</sup>

The writer goes on to say that a couple of Roman coins were found there, and this bridge spanned a fairly narrow stretch of the River Seiont. Precisely when it acquired that association with Helen/Elen – or Speed's 'Elyn' – is not known. Was it, for example, so named by locals at the time of its rediscovery in the late 1700s, by which time it was obviously no longer serviceable as a bridge. Speed includes this bridge in his map of 1610, and although he does not name it the position is shown very close to the church itself. It is certainly possible that the localised name for the bridge may have remained in use long prior to that era, extending even to Roman times. We should, of course, recall that the borough of Caernarfon with its walls and castle were not substantially developed until the late 1200s, and prior to then any surviving fortified Roman sites, including Segontium itself, would have remained useful as strongholds for the local Britons after the legions abandoned Britannia. Although its precise location is unknown today, there was a Gwynedd royal court (Welsh *Llys*) in this location, as is evidenced by a charter issued to the canons of Penmon Priory in 1221 by the ruler Llywelyn the Great (c.1173-1240). Earlier still, another king of Gwynedd, Rhodri the Great (c.820-878) is said to have based his royal court at *'Caer Segent'*, before moving from this base at Segontium to Aberffraw in Anglesey.

Nothing much remains today of the riverside fort of Hen Waliau, which the antiquary John Leyland viewed in the mid-1550s and described it as *'falling into the river'*. What little remained of this Roman site by the 1700s was described by another antiquary, Thomas Pennant, who observed Caernarfon's 18th-century



rapid building development in response to its growing mercantile trade. Pennant noted: *'I was informed that in Tre'r Beblig, on the opposite shore, had been other ruins, the work of the same people [Romans]. This very curious antiquity [Hen Waliau] is at present most shamefully disfigured by walls and other buildings, insomuch that I fear my description will in a manner become unintelligible.'*<sup>7</sup> Pennant was certainly right and in 1793 an Act was passed for *'enlarging, deepening, cleansing and improving and regulating the harbour of Caernarfon'*, leading to the gradual disappearance of the town's Roman legacy on the banks of the River Seiont. When another traveller, Thomas Roscoe, set out to explore the site of Elen's Chapel and her well he remarked in his *Wanderings and Excursions in North Wales* (1836) that they were *'still among the wrecks of time, although not readily discovered even by the observant stranger'*. He had more luck in identifying the nearby Hen Waliau: *'On two sides the walls, yet almost entire, rise to a height of eleven feet, and are six in thickness'*. These walls are shown in a photograph on page 29.

The second and most likely option for the location where Edward I *'honourably placed'* the remains of whoever it was in the tomb, is Caernarfon's parish church known as Llanbeblig. It stands close to the ruins of the Roman fort of Segontium – in Constantine Road – and is dedicated to the Welsh Saint Peblig, also known by his Latin name of Publicius. In Peter Bartrum's monumental study, *A Welsh Classical Dictionary* (1993 edition), Peblig is identified from Welsh sources as being the son of Maccsen Wledig (the 4th-century emperor Magnus Maximus), while Peblig's mother was Elen ferch Eudaf. The Welsh word *ferch* indicates she was the daughter of a ruler called Eudaf Hen ap Caradoc – Old Eudaf son of Caradoc. Geoffrey of Monmouth re-names Eudaf – Elen's father – into the latinised Octavius, casually obscuring the character's native background as a Briton. Saint Peblig's church (Llanbeblig) at Caernarfon is said to have been originally founded around 433 and is believed to stand on the site of Segontium's Roman cemetery.

The present church building fabric is 14th-century with a few 13th-century remnants, along with substantial remodelling of later centuries, including the over-zealous 'restorations' of the 19th-century. Dating from the 1890s, a stained glass window in Saint Peblig's church (page 29) shows Emperor Constantine's mother Saint Helen, accompanied as usual with her discovery from the Holy Land, the True Cross, said to have lain buried in Jerusalem since the crucifixion. Here again confusion has taken place, since Peblig's parents were Eudaf's daughter Elen and Magnus Maximus, so they should really be the subjects illustrated in the windows of Peblig's church. Such was the Victorian 'restoration' job.

As with the Rood of Chester, the rood that was formerly located at Llanbeblig was unusual in that it depicted not the more familiar crucifixion scene, but rather the Holy Trinity with God the Father supporting the crucified Jesus.<sup>8</sup> Llanbeblig became an important site of pilgrimage, the original 5th-century church being of special significance for its great antiquity. Incidentally, the Welsh word Llan had the original meaning of a physical enclosure, in particular one surrounding a place of a religious nature, rather than its present, generalised meaning as indicating a church or parish.<sup>9</sup> Like its Chester counterpart, the Rood of Llanbeblig was an object of inspiration for several medieval Welsh poets. Inevitably, nothing remains of this church's earliest incarnation, at the time when Segontium's buildings had only been abandoned by the Roman garrison just a few decades earlier. However, the report of the Royal



This sepulchral plaque from the 14th-century church in Beaumaris, Anglesey illustrates God the Father supporting the crucified Jesus, the theme of the Rood of Llanbeblig which was the subject of a 15th-century poem.



Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments in Wales (Caernarvonshire, volume II, Central, 1960) mentions a Roman altar incorporated in the footings of a wall in the nave, demonstrating more early recycling of masonry objects from Segontium itself.

There is also another stone object (right) inside the church and it is thought by some to be related to a 'heart burial', whereby an individual's actual corpse is entombed elsewhere but the heart – and remaining viscera – were buried separately at another location, either at the wishes of the deceased or for some practical reason. For example, it may have been a medieval knight who died on crusade in the Holy Land, where his actual body remained, the heart being returned to a place in his homeland for burial. At only some 28ins/71cm in length the effigy is far too small to have once lain flat above the sarcophagus of a recently deceased person. Consisting of a rather crudely carved figure of a man with his hands clasped in prayer, there is evidence of carved chain-mail on the head and arms, and the figure's feet rest on what was probably an heraldic-type animal (a lion?), widely used in effigy symbolism.

In the 1890s the architect Harold Hughes undertook a detailed study of Llanbeblig Church, his findings being published in the journal *Archaeologia Cambrensis* in April 1894. Hughes briefly mentions this unusual carved figure by describing it only as a 'peculiar diminutive effigy', but has nothing further to say on the subject. However, he does note several features in the building itself, where pieces of early sepulchral slabs have been recycled into the building's fabric, including a lintel above a window in the south wall, and he dates these alterations and additions to the 1500s. His detailed graphic plan of the church shows that the wall in which the effigy was vertically placed above the doorway is also from that period. It has the appearance of being considerably weathered, so it may have previously been outside the church.

It is tempting to wonder if Edward I's relocation of the remains – 'honourably placed in the church' – involved the making of a modestly-sized effigy to cover what by the 1280s would have been nothing more than a jumble of bones and a skull, which the king evidently considered worthy of honour. This may have required the making of a small stone ossuary, the lid of which was formed by the carved figure slab now in the wall. The full size sarcophagus in which the body of this individual was originally placed at Segontium, may have suggested to the king that the Christian reburial at Llanbeblig necessitated some creative effort, albeit of more modest proportions to accommodate the few remains of the deceased. As the bones were believed to have been of Roman imperial status, the reinterment was obviously the honourable thing to do and the carved figure does look like tomb effigies of around Edward's era. This does rather beg the question why the original, full-size sarcophagus could not have been left where it was, but this may be resolved by the fact that it is known that the church was built in the Roman cemetery. It may, therefore, have simply been in the way of building remodelling at the time.

Across the Seiont from Saint Peblig's church is a site known as Helen's Wood (Welsh *Coed Helen*), where there is a farm called Is-Helen, the Welsh word-element 'Is' indicating something lower or below, in this instance the adjacent hill. A brief mention of Caernarfon from a contemporary French account of the English King Richard II's plight in 1399 may refer to this wooded area: 'He [King Richard] thought that himself and his people would be more secure at Caernarvon; it is a town, and a fine noble castle, a place of strength. On one side is abundance of woods for the chase, and the tide comes up on the other quarter'.<sup>10</sup>



Maybe the carved figure in the wall was originally a medieval ossuary cover, or perhaps it related to a heart burial.



In the 14th-century the old bridge across the River Seiont was still in existence, as confirmed much later by Speed's map of 1610, although what name, if any, was attached to it in the 1300s is unknown.

Nowadays, Helen's Wood is dominated by the local authority's parkland, although there was once an ancient hill fort there, the military site being subsequently redeveloped in the late 18th-century because of its strategically advantageous position, overlooking the western entrance to the Menai Strait. Widespread fear of a French invasion prompted such actions at the time. Helen's Wood is opposite Anglesey and has a panoramic view of this area of the Irish Sea. The hilltop site was also used during the Second World War as a lookout post. This elevated coastal site may well have been used in Roman times as a signal station, because of its prominent location, communicating easily with the garrison of Segontium across the local river.



Evading Henry Bolingbroke (the future Henry IV), King Richard II fled from one Welsh castle to another in an effort to evade capture. This illustration depicts him at Conwy Castle, disguised in a monk's cowl with his hand raised.

FROM *Antiquities of England* by Joseph Strutt, 1842.

Helen's Wood is actually a name from comparatively recent times. During his tours in Wales in 1804 to 1813, the Welsh topographer Richard Fenton (1746-1821) was in this location and his local companion referred to this place as Coed Alun, the name by which it had been known since at least medieval times, according to archive material. It appears that the place-name may have changed around 1730, when a wealthy landowner and sheriff of Caernarfon, Rhys Thomas developed a seven-bedroom mansion on this site, renaming his estate Coed Helen. There was an earlier dwelling located there, since a re-set stone in one of the gables is inscribed '1606 WT/G', and a document from the previous year refers to a property called 'Koydalen' (i.e. Coed Alun). Dated March 1740, a legal document survives in Gwynedd's Caernarfon archives that refers to *'the capital messuage [i.e. site occupied by the owner] of Coed Alun otherwise Coed Helen'*.

A similar situation arose in South Wales, as recorded in *The History of Pembrokeshire* by James Phillips, published

in 1909. The author's attention is focused on the town of Haverfordwest, which is obviously not a Welsh place-name, and Phillips says that the pre-Norman name for the settlement was Caer Alun, but he then claims that Emperor Maximus actually named it Caer Elen in honour of his partner. The writer then suggests it was later interpreted as Caer Alun, although he does not provide any citations to support this otherwise interesting assertion.

It does not appear to be recorded why Caernarfon's Rhys Thomas renamed Coed Alun, but an article in a Welsh journal of 1892 has a slightly hysterical – in tone at least – suggestion: *'The older people in Caernarvon still say Coed Alun. Helenomania is one of the perversest fads of our North-Welsh village etymologists; it consist in altering every possible place-name, or part thereof, which contains the sequence of consonants l (or ll) and n into Helen'*.<sup>11</sup> This scholarly writer was clearly vexed and excited on the subject, but in all probability when Rhys Thomas acquired the estate he simply reflected historic associations that were already enshrined in local folk-memory at that time. This area of Caernarfon abounds in locations including the





name Helen, rather than Elen, because the town was from the late 13th-century colonial in character as part of the growing English Empire, which by the 18th-century saw itself as Britannia literally enlightening the world, as illustrated on this magazine cover from 1788.

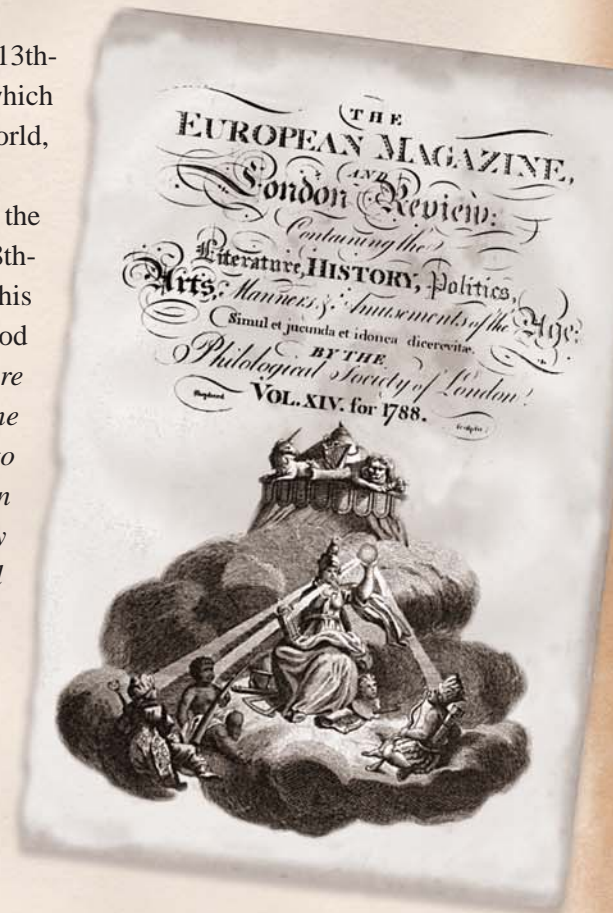
Equally vexed, if not downright livid was 'Sylvanus Urban', the pseudonym of Edward Cave, the antiquary and a contributor to this 18th-century publication, *The European Magazine and London Review*. This writer's concern arose from the extensive deforestation of Helen's Wood by its then owner: *'This gentleman [Rhys Thomas] took a fancy (were I speak in a romantic style I should say he was incited by some malevolent spirit) to cut down the delightful shade. This lovely spot to strangers was enchanting – to the neighbourhood and Carnarvon town a prospect refreshing to the eye; yet for the trifling sum of seventy pounds (no object surely to a man of fortune) was this beauteous wood to be exterminated'*.<sup>12</sup> The writer then goes on to indulge his literary skills with a lengthy poem, expressing the all too familiar ingredients so essential in the Romantic Movement of his day: Love and Death. With a high degree of inevitability, the object of the love element is a woman called Helen:

*Where Helen died she fix'd her airy cell.  
Well pleas'd at the deep solitude,  
She murmur'd out, "Ah! hapless maid!  
Here ne'er again may tyrant rude  
Pollute the place, or I in vain call aid."  
Nightly e'er since has the sad Helen's shade  
Wander'd about o'er where her dust is laid.*

Apparently, this visitor to Caernarfon in the latter half of the 1700s had accessed some folk-memory of Helen/Elen being entombed there, probably in the ancient waterside chapel ('her airy cell'?) that Speed calls 'S.Elyn'. He then composed his verse from the local knowledge imparted to him, although the anglicised Helen was substituted for Elen in his romantic English poetry.

There is a possible etymology for how the name of Coed Alun itself was acquired and this revolves around the old Welsh word for a deer – alan, later corrupted to alun. In modern Welsh the animal is referred to as carw, although a young deer is still called elain. The above quote featuring King Richard II does mention 'woods for the chase', making a fairly reasonable connection. It is just possible that Rhys Thomas took alun or elain to be a reference to the personal name Elen, hence the change to Helen's Wood. Whether he was an 'Helenomaniac' remains to be seen. He certainly had a disregard for the former woodland where he built his new mansion. One thing is certain and that is that Helen/Elen had a predominant influence on the place-names in the Caernarfon area, including highways and properties. This is a reflection of the stubborn presence of folk-memory, which seems impervious to the pedantic rantings of a Victorian scholar on what he termed '*Helenomania*'.

Many of the place-name variations and corruptions were not, in fact, attributable to a manic appetite for a Helen, but rather they stem from the actions of the map-makers through the centuries. This is especially so when encountering the Welsh names in and around Caernarfon. Almost adjacent to what would have been the Roman road heading south from Segontium (roughly today's A487), there is a property called Tyddyn Elen on modern Ordnance Survey maps, and a field (Welsh *Cae*) nearby was recorded on a map of around 1840 as Cae Tyddyn Elan [*sic.*]. Robert Dawson's map of 1816 in the British Library collection refers to the





property as Tyddyn Helen. Either way, a personal name was originally intended here and it was clearly that of the Welsh Elen, rather than Emperor Constantine's mother Helen. While conflation between the two 4th-century women can be excused to some degree in a literary context, it is much harder to justify when the challenge faced map-makers gathering topographical data from the Welsh locals during surveys.

Travelling less than half a mile south along this same route, we again encounter a place-name associated with Elen. Close by the village of Bontnewydd (meaning New Bridge) there is a property called Bod Elen, and like others it reflects the associations with this local saint. In the late 18th-century antiquarian journal, the *Cambrian Register* an article was published regarding administrative divisions and property valuations, the information being extracted from documents dated 1352. In clarifying the meaning of certain words, the writer explains that, '*the Bod, though literally it means being, is a dwelling, or habitation; and is generally, if not always, applied like Trev, to the principal houses*'.

Etymology suggests the usage of bod is similar to the word abode in English, and perhaps also cognate with the Germanic 'buode', which could refer to a tent or similar structure. Therefore, it is just possible that the far older place-names enshrined in folk-memory derived from there *being* an encampment during the military activities associated with Elen of Caernarfon. As a toponym Bod Elen appears elsewhere in Wales and also in Cornwall, and we shall be tracing place-names associated with Elen's warrior role more fully in the next chapter.

This Bod Elen property name managed to escape the corrupting influences of the cartographers and others, with their fondness for substituting 'Helen'. So we can – to some extent

– dismiss the concerns about '*Helenomania*' expressed by the eminent antiquary, Egerton Phillimore (1856-1937). A specialist in Welsh place-names, he also took a dim view of the efforts of the Ordnance Survey's input, frequently dismissing them as '*mapsters*'. Richard Fenton's early 19th-century travel journal expressed equal concern when he remarked on '*the new map of Cardiganshire by Carey and surveyed by one Singer, who appears to have been much too sparing of his names. I was sorry to find it had not been surveyed by a Welshman. In short, it is a pretty map to the eye, the mountains and hills being finely shaded and marked. Several rivers not specified, which I think a great fault, as no river ought to be left out of a map which has a name*'. The shortcomings of cartographers proves to be particularly challenging when we visit north-east Anglesey in chapter 3.

A place-name near Mold in Flintshire called Erw Helen, and a farm of the same name near Builth in Powys both exhibit a partial corruption, since it would read Elen's Acre (Welsh *Erw*) in translation. In his

*Helen or Elen?* The extract below gives the particulars of the Will of John Evans, a wealthy landowner of Caernarfon. As highlighted in the text he bequeathed to Miss Mary Owen the extensive property called 'Helen Bank'. This reflects the anglicisation that stemmed from medieval times. Once we move out beyond the confines of the town of Caernarfon itself, we

find a change from Helen to Elen, even on a broken property sign. This shift is a reflection of how in the more rural areas folk-memory retained the esteem in which the 4th-century Elen was once held.



**JOHN EVANS** by his last Will and Testament, dated 1824, gave, devised, limited, sold, conveyed, and assigned, his messuages, lands, hereof in fee simple, hold and leasehold, in the parishes of Anglesey, and all his rights, to his most dutiful and respected son, John Evans, esq. a lawyer-at-law, his heirs and assigns, and for the uses following, that he shall and will permit and suffer Miss Mary Owen, now taking care of my house, and her assigns, to have, possess and enjoy *the messuage, lands, orchards and plantations called Helen Bank*, which I give and devise to her for and during the term of her natural life. I do hereby direct that they, the said *Evan Evans* and *Mary Owen*, shall and may live in my dwelling-house in the town of *Caernarvon* \*, as long as they shall live.



ground-breaking study of *The Lives of British Saints*, the Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924) suggests that the cult of Saint Elen of Caernarfon transferred to Saint Helen during the 1400s. The implication of Baring-Gould's assertion is that the little-known Welsh Elen was eclipsed by the more famous Helen, wife and mother of Roman emperors, through an anglicising, romano-centric social process in the 15th-century.

Locally-produced tourist guides continued to use Helen rather than correcting it to Elen, as illustrated in William Pritchard's *History of Carnarvon Castle* and the area from 1849, where even this Caernarfon-based Welsh author and publisher was under the impression that the place-names referred to Constantine's mother: 'A well, bearing her name, is still in existence at Bryn Helen, near the Pwllheli road, and it is considered one of the finest springs of mineral water in these parts: in the neighbourhood it is famous for its healing qualities, and is used extensively in the manufacture of excellent soda-water. There are several places in this locality identified with the name of Helen, viz., Coed Helen or Helen's Wood, Tyddyn Helen or Helen's farm or tenement'.

The House of Lords' parliamentary debate (3rd April 1862) on the bill proposing a new railway line into Caernarfon came close to getting it right when they referred to 'Coedellen', with an almost forgivable one extra letter L in the mix. But then William Pritchard was even guilty of continuing the corruption of his own family name, the insertion of the letter T being another example of anglicisation of Welsh, the original spelling being Prichard.

An 18th-century visitor recorded his observations while staying in Caernarfon and he mentions the local River Seiont, but with a specific designation, suggesting more input from local folk-memory: 'The town of Caernarvon is situated partly on the Menai [Strait], which is here upwards of a mile in breadth, and partly on the small river of St. Helen's'.<sup>13</sup> This river's name is particularly unusual in that it changes from Afon Seiont to Afon Rhythallt (meaning river of the steep hill) upstream near the village of Llanrug, rather than retaining its Caernarfon-based name all the way to its source in the lakes of Padarn and Peris, both of which are named after early Celtic saints. Clearly, the particular saint embodied in the river's name is Elen, anglicised to Helen as in several other places in and around Caernarfon.

The 1821 tourists' guide quoted from earlier also contains a most intriguing statement, the recorded folk-memory being as yet unverified by archaeology: 'The common people have a tradition, that there was a subterraneous passage either from this place or some other part of the Castle, to Coed Helen wood, on the other side of the river'. That such a piece of engineering exists seems quite improbable, but that does not preclude its existence. Fortunately, we are spared it being described in the guide-book as Helen's Tunnel!

When encountering local place-names incorporating that of Helen, rather than its Welsh counterpart of Elen, we must remember that the castle and walled-town of Caernarfon were built by Edward I at the end of the 13th-century, as were the similarly fortified Conwy along the coast and also Beaumaris on Anglesey. As a consequence, these were three English colonial towns with an imported population, and the native Welsh were definitely regarded as unwelcome. To the garrisons they were simply the enemy beyond the walls. This historic imposition of the English language here would tend to replace the Welsh name Elen with Helen, producing the place-names we find today. As an illustration of the extent of this medieval 'ethnic cleansing', we find the English officers of Conwy in the 15th-century insisting that, 'it is no more meete [acceptable] for a welshman to beare any office in Wales, or especiaillie in any of the three englishe townes than it is for a frenchman to be officer in Calais, or a skotte in Berwicke'.<sup>14</sup>

In Gwynedd's neighbouring present-day Conwy County Borough, which was once part of the ancient kingdom of Gwynedd, there is the church of Saint Cystennin (Welsh for Constantine; spelling variation Custenin) in Llangystennin. This church was built in 1843 on the site of what was widely regarded as the oldest and smallest church in North Wales, said to date from the late 300s, thus putting it into the Helen/Elen time-frame of the 4th-century. As might be expected given its age, the original church's foundation is vague, variously described as being dedicated to the emperor Constantine the Great, or another Cystennin who was



# LLANGYSTENNIN

## Church



The church of Llangystennin is located south-east of Llandudno in the modern county of Conwy, once part of the ancient kingdom of Gwynedd.



The present church was built in 1843 on the site of what was probably the oldest church in Wales, believed to date to the 4th or early 5th-century. The original Llan was that of Saint Cystennin (Constantine), a son of Saint Elen of Caernarfon, and his brother was Saint Peblig. However, the 19th-century windows depict the emperor Constantine the Great and his mother Saint Helen of Constantinople, illustrating how a local saint and her son have been eclipsed over the centuries.



the son of a Breton king, or a Constantine who was a chieftain of the Britons. In a 20th-century study<sup>15</sup> of these early saints, the author goes through various possibilities and eventually concludes that this church was probably founded by a Custenin Gorneu. The cognomen Corneu (C mutated to G) would indicate that he was Constantine of Cornwall, who is recorded as a relative of Saint Cybi. A similar association with Cornwall arises in the name of the village of Llangernyw in the county of Conwy, the gernyw part of the name indicating a reference to Cornishmen.

Whoever it was who founded the original church, its 19th-century windows depict Saint Helen and her son the emperor Constantine the Great, whom the medieval writer Gerald of Wales described as '*son of our Helen*' to stress that he believed she was British-born. Just to muddy the waters still further, the ancient Welsh literature says that the saints Cystennin/Constantine and his brother Peblig were the sons of Saint Elen of Caernarfon, otherwise known as Elen Luyddog – Elen of the Hosts, or legions, thereby giving her a specifically Roman military connection. The Welsh word luyddog could also be interpreted as meaning 'warlike'. And their father was Elen's partner Macsen Wledig, the emperor Magnus Maximus. Here another Welsh church's windows are quite misleading and one cannot help but wonder if this is a case of cultural 'cleansing' in a formerly anglicised area, dominated by the colonial castles of Conwy and Caernarfon. We shall examine what little is known of Elen and Macsen in the next chapter, where we shall attempt to settle the sediment of these murky waters of history.

Given all the local connections with Elen, her emperor partner Magnus Maximus and a son named Constantine, it appears more than likely that the original 4th-century church of Llangystennin was not founded by a Breton or a Cornishman, but rather Elen's son, whose saintly family was active in the area at that time. In addition, that tomb in Caernarfon that has so confused and perplexed many could simply have been that of Elen's son. His father was indeed a Roman emperor, but not a Constans or a Constantine. He was the Macsen of the folk-memory of this area of North Wales, and given his imperial status it would be fitting that his son Constantine/Cystennin would be laid to rest in the cemetery of the then flourishing community of Segontium, where nearly a thousand years later King Edward I had occasion to provide an honourable reinterment of his remains. Any inscription on the sarcophagus may have been weathered into illegibility even by the era of Nennius in the 9th-century, and a further five hundred years of Welsh weather would not have left much to read for an English king versed in Latin.

The ancient church of Saint Cystennin makes an appearance during the reign of Edward's father, Henry III when, following the sacking of Gwynedd's Aberconwy Abbey by the English soldiers in 1245, the king received a papal reprimand. A 19th-century work mentions the incident and the church of Llangystennin, '*said to be the first Christian church erected in Wales. Henry III was commanded by the pope to do penance in this church, but was subsequently absolved, on payment of a fine of five hundred marks of silver*'.<sup>16</sup> As usual, money talks in Rome and one may wonder if any of those silver coins found their way to the abbot of Aberconwy to cover his restoration costs.

With the more famous Constantine the Great we are on the threshold of the era that led to Christianity becoming officially endorsed as the religion favoured by Rome, although it would take some time before the old gods left centre stage. Although lauded as the 'first' Christian emperor, it would appear that his father Constantius was a Christian. The evidence for this lies in the writings of Socrates Scholasticus, who was born in Constantine's re-branded city of Constantinople – formerly known as Byzantium – around the year 380. In his work entitled *Historia Ecclesiastica* (Church History), Socrates covers the period 305 to 439, and he states that Constantius had renounced pagan '*idolatrous worship*', resulting, the writer asserts, in a more prosperous life. Evidently, Constantius was a Christian before his more famous son, but then so too was the earlier still Severus Alexander, who was emperor from 222 to 235. He supported the building of a temple dedicated to Jesus, but the project was thwarted by Rome's pagan priests, according to the much-debated *Historia Augusta*, said to be a late Roman collection of biographies.

Emperor Constantine's mother Helen is one of those characters from history whose origins are



shrouded in uncertainty. Where, for example, was she born? Some argue it was Drepanum in Asia Minor which was subsequently renamed Helenopolis (Helen's City), as were several other places in a fit of 4th-century 'Helenomania', sponsored by her son Constantine the Great. A number of England's chroniclers of the Middle Ages assert she was born at Colchester in what became the English county of Essex, saying that she was the daughter of the British King Cole (perhaps the 'merry old soul' of nursery rhyme fame). The early Welsh tradition of a King Coel from the late Roman era of Britain refers to him as Coel Hen – *old* Coel. As we have read, Eudaf's name also included the same descriptive Welsh word – Hen. Some of the Welsh genealogies provided Coel with the additional cognomen of Godebog, which broadly means protector, while other sources give Godebog as his father's name. In Pughe's *Welsh Dictionary* of 1832 the word coel is given as meaning omen. As usual, much uncertainty prevails from the more ancient records.

The suggestion that Constantine's mother was British has generally been dismissed, and one modern historian describes it as an '*audacious claim*', the author going on to confidently declare that '*it is almost certain that Helena* [i.e. Saint Helen of Constantinople] *never set foot on British soil*'.<sup>17</sup> Helen's erstwhile partner Constantius certainly undertook military service in Britain, and his politically-inspired marriage to Theodora was probably just an expedient gesture at the time, without his necessarily losing regular contact with Helen, who was probably born – *wherever* – around the year 250. The 14th-century *Oath Book of Colchester* claims she was born in that town in 242. This earnest fabrication was contrived by Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1100-c.1155) in his *History of the Kings of Britain*, and then repeated by the Anglo-Norman chronicler Henry of Huntingdon, who had found a copy of Geoffrey's work on a visit to Bec Abbey in Normandy in 1139.

Highly imaginative and often dismissed as given to fiction, Geoffrey describes how after the British King Coel's death, when Constantius was actively engaged in the province of Britannia, the Roman military leader had seized the opportunity and married Coel's daughter 'Helen'. Geoffrey connected the personal name of Coel with that of the town of Colchester, his assumption being that the town's name meant Coel's Fort. In fact, the town's name is derived from that of the River Colne, the early settlement there being known by the East Saxons (hence the subsequent county name of Essex) as Colneceaster, referring to the Roman fort on that river. One modern scholar<sup>18</sup> has pointed out that in a 15th-century copy of a now lost 12th-century original manuscript (Jesus College, Oxford MS LXI) of the '*Chronicle of the Early Britons (Brut Y Bryttaniait)*', Coel is described as 'Earl of Gloucester' not Colchester. Geoffrey certainly claimed his sources were early Welsh texts, but on this and other historic subjects he seems to have preferred his own ideas. He was not alone in this approach. The idea of chroniclers as 'historians' being subject to 'peer review' was inevitably unimaginable in the Middle Ages.

Needless to say, Colchester's townsfolk seized on Geoffrey's assertion with gleeful opportunism, recognising the potential income from pilgrims and the like, all eager to visit the claimed birthplace of the famous Saint Helen. In a letter (c.1406) seeking the granting of indulgence from the pope, Colchester's Hospital and Chapel of the Holy Cross explained to the papacy their need for funds, adding that Helen '*toke on part of the Holy Crosse and closed it with golde and sent it to her hospital to Colchester*'.<sup>19</sup> The letter then goes on to record that in the year 1401 their much treasured relic had been stolen. Fearing capture with the artefact, the thieves had cast it into a pond outside the town. However, it would not sink but floated above the surface, so the town's folk retrieved the relic and returned it to the chapel. No doubt this miraculous yarn had the desired effect in promoting contributions to this early 15th-century fundraising campaign.



The corporate seal (circa 14th-century) of the town of Colchester depicts Helen, Constantine's mother.

Image based on a line drawing in *The Oath Book of Colchester* by W. G. Benham, published in 1907.



Thus far the 'evidence' for Constantine's mother Helen being of British stock is on fairly shaky ground, having looked at the early medieval sources. Being Anglo-Norman these chroniclers would, quite naturally, have relished the prospect of laying claim to Saint Helen's birthplace. And others just tended to repeat Geoffrey's story to the point of entrenchment as fact. Turning to the 4th-century Latin sources, whom we might expect to be more reliable, there remain some oblique suggestions that Helen may have at least been in Britannia afterall, although not necessarily born there. The pagan historian Eutropius, who flourished in the mid-300s, was an imperial secretary in Constantinople and he refers to Constantine's mother – without actually naming her – when he says that this emperor was the child of an obscure marriage (Latin *ex obscuriore matrimonio*).<sup>20</sup> He is, of course, referring to the liaison with Constantius Chlorus, the implication being that Helen was not of an imperial blood-line, and by suggestion not even a Roman. In the flattering orations of Roman panegyrists from around 289 to 389AD, there appears to be slight evidence to imply that Constantine was born in Britannia, so his mother was obviously present if that were the case. Addressing Constantine directly, one panegyric, when referring to Britannia, says the emperor ennobled the province by '*emerging from there*'. Whether or not the writer simply meant that Constantius elevated his son Constantine to imperial status in the province is open to interpretation. Another of these writers speaks of Constantine as having been '*sent by the gods from where the land ends*'.<sup>21</sup> This 'evidence' is circumstantial at best, so the jury of scholarship will continue to deliberate the verdict on these origins.

Saint Ambrose (c.340-397) was the first known writer to mention Helen's discovery of the True Cross in Jerusalem, although he was none too flattering when he described her as a '*stable-maid*' from mainland Europe. Could it be that Ambrose actually meant it as a metaphor for a servant ('*maid*') of Christ, whom we are told was born in a stable? Ambrose grew up in Trier, the key Roman location where Helen's son Constantine lavished great expense on constructing several large scale ecclesiastical buildings. Like his father Constantius, Constantine had occasion to do battle with Frankish warriors, and after his victory he is said to have celebrated in the amphitheatre at Trier by throwing many prisoners to their deaths among the wild beasts.

With a touch of historic irony Helen subsequently became patron saint of difficult marriages – 'obscure' or otherwise. Her son Constantine murdered both his son Crispus (by his first marriage in 303 to Minervina) and also his second wife Fausta, so he could hardly be described as particularly 'Christian' in his moral behaviour. The history of Roman emperors is, of course, littered with the imperial slaughtering of relatives, so his actions would not have been too shocking at the time, even though it may raise a few eyebrows nowadays, especially given his esteemed status among Christians, particularly those of the Roman persuasion.

Be that as it may, Constantine remains – along with his dynamic mother – someone who gave Christianity the push it needed to become one of the world's leading religions. It seems improbable, given his murderous approach to family life, that Constantine did so out of rampant piety, or anything approaching religious zeal. It is more likely that he was motivated by a pragmatic need to coalesce the then fragmented imperial structure and its unstable empire. He obviously thought that a predominant religion would have a unifying influence, and if Rome held the controlling hand his optimism could be fulfilled. Galerius was now too ill to be bothered with it all, but Maxentius, the heir-apparent son of Maximian was, not surprisingly, less than impressed with the situation, particularly as he was also the son-in-law of Galerius. The game of

*"He rendered her through his influence so devout a worshipper of God (though not previously so), that she seemed to have been instructed from the first by the Saviour of mankind: and besides this, he had honoured her so fully with imperial dignities, that in every province, and in the very ranks of the soldiery, she was spoken of under the titles of Augusta, and empress, and her likeness was impressed on golden coins."*



Eusebius on Constantine and Helen, from a translation by C. F. Cruse, 1836.



emperors' musical chairs was reaching its climax and when the music stopped only victory through warfare could ensure a seat on the imperial throne.

Constantine was in Britain when news emerged that Maxentius' military build-up was underway. In 311 things were coming to a head, although the 'Christian' Constantine was receiving ill omens via his pagan soothsayers. Nevertheless, he gathered his army and pursued Maxentius. The contemporary historian, biographer and overt propagandist of Constantine, Eusebius of Caesarea – whom we encountered in the previous chapter – describes how Constantine experienced a vision of the sun with a cross upon it and the message, 'by this, conquer'. We should recall at this point the personal spiritual affiliation Constantine had as an initiate into the pagan *Sol Invictus* cult, so popular with the Roman military. Socrates Scholasticus uses the same phrase in his *History of the Church*, but describes the vision as 'a pillar of light in the heavens, in the form of a cross'. Fearful that he may have been imagining the vision, Constantine then asked those around him if they had seen it and they confirmed that they had, so it was interpreted as a positive omen for victory, regardless of the soothsayers' prognostications. Socrates then says that, 'he caused a standard in the form of a cross to be prepared, which is preserved in the palace even to the present time.' During the night following his vision Constantine had dreamt that Jesus told him to replace the usual Roman symbol of the eagle with a symbolic motif expressing the Christian nature of his vision.

The battle symbol that resulted from these visionary events is widely believed to have been the Chi-Rho, a device representing the first two letters in Greek of the word Christ. The Roman eagle emblem never entirely died out, as it forms the Bible-supporting lecterns (pictured below) in countless Christian places of worship, and the eagle also became the symbol of John the Evangelist. In many world cultures the eagle is also a symbol of the sun. Like Eusebius his contemporary Lactantius was also an advisor to Constantine the Great and he too recorded the inspiration for the divine logo (Greek *Logos* – Word), although he does not mention the vision of the sun with a cross: 'Constantine was warned in a dream to put the Divine Mark, the Sign of the Cross, upon the shields of his soldiers [...] and having made this his distinction, he drew out his army'.<sup>22</sup> It would appear from these contemporary accounts that Constantine's troops went into battle displaying a simple cross. The Chi-Rho symbol with its Greek letters is a rather complex piece of typographic artistry. Why not a simple cross set upon a circle representing the sun, as per the emperor's vision? Perhaps it was all too pagan for the early church fathers, so the Chi-Rho was devised to accord with their sensitivity.

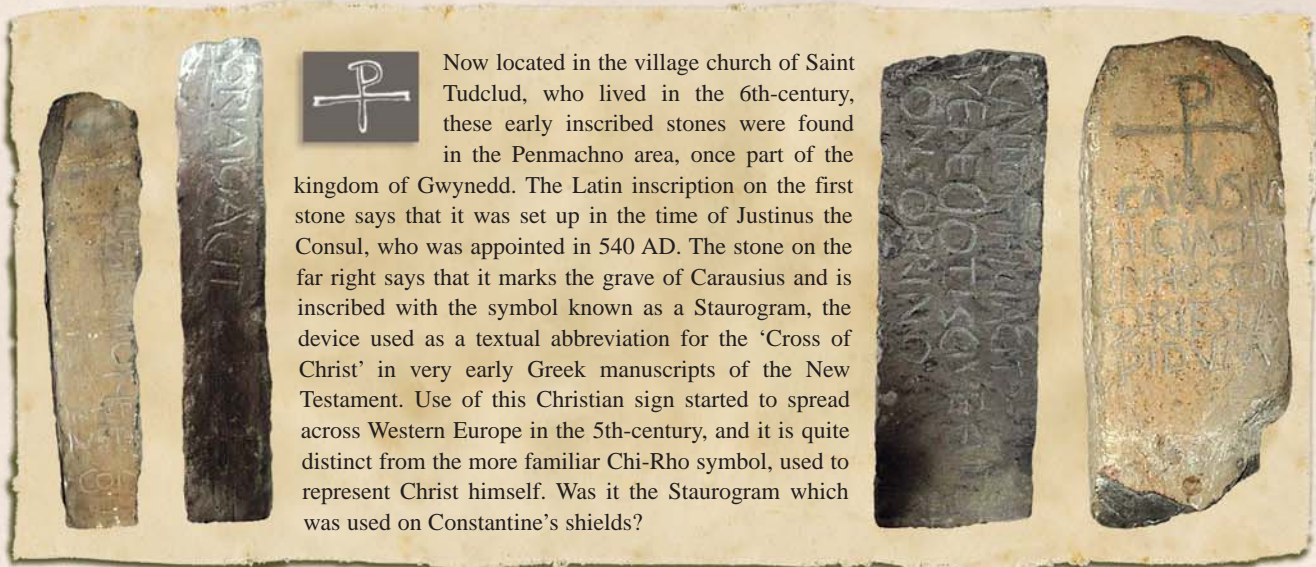
In a work on early Christian finger-rings, the author published his research on the application and use of the Chi-Rho symbol and concluded that, 'the earliest instance of its occurrence is said to be about 317AD, although it has also been stated that its first use was in 323 [and] it was publicly used in 377.'<sup>23</sup> Constantine was finally baptised as a Christian shortly before he died, which occurred in May of 337. What is especially striking is

According to his biographer Eusebius, Constantine the Great adopted the Chi-Rho symbol for incorporation into his military banner (Latin *Labarum*), as shown in the window below. Contrary to this is the implication from Lactantius. The first symbol used may have been what is called a Staurogram, symbolising the cross rather than Christ, illustrated opposite on page 46.

ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ  
(Christos)



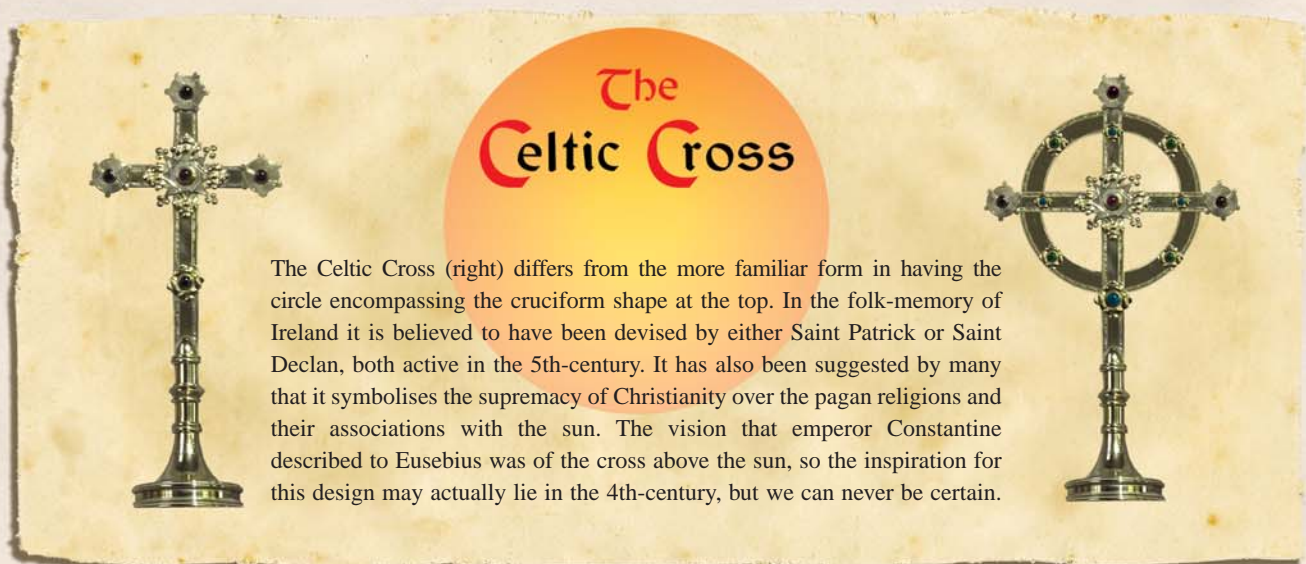




how Constantine's solar vision, which he swore to Eusebius he had definitely witnessed, bears a remarkable resemblance to what ultimately became the design of the Celtic Cross, so uniquely different and specific to a seminal branch of Christianity that was originally quite separate from the Latin product of Rome. Nevertheless, the Chi-Rho was widely adopted in the Roman Empire and it still adorns innumerable altar cloths and other church paraphernalia.

Armed with Constantine's heavenly briefing, the re-branded army charged Maxentius and his troops in the autumn of 312 and there was a complete rout, with the fleeing army of Maxentius heading for the nearby Milvian Bridge and escape. It was not to be and Maxentius drowned in the River Tiber during the ensuing chaos. Constantine made a victorious entry into Rome, where he erected a triumphal arch which, somewhat oddly, does not display any particularly Christian imagery. In fact, it incorporates recycled sculptural material from Rome's pagan past. He set about dealing with the disintegrating Tetrarchy arrangement, along with the empire's many other problems and was soon sole emperor. His subsequent Edict of Milan of 313 established religious toleration and Christianity gained a favoured foothold in the Roman Empire, after many years of dreadful persecution in imperial hands.

Constantine's mother Helen was then to embark in the 320s on a truly remarkable journey to the Holy Land, being remarkable both in the discoveries she is said to have made and also in the fact that she was, apparently, in her late 70s at the time. Although the legend of her finding the True Cross was later embellished by many writers, bringing in all manner of characters from the Old Testament, including also fabulous accounts of the wood itself, the legend is one of archaeology but not as we know it. Somewhat tongue in cheek, Helen was also to become the patron saint of archaeologists.





## History of the Holy Cross

1483



Now Judas, with the cross comes near,  
Which he had found, as you may hear;  
And also with him brings nails three,  
To the empress fair, as here you see.



The third cross next they on him laid,  
When straightway he was living made;  
And by this means they quickly knew,  
That this one was our Lord's cross true.



Our Lord's cross here Helena takes,  
And in God's honour two halves makes:  
At Salem she one half doth lay,  
The other half she takes away.



Here now, as we are truly taught,  
The remnant of the cross is brought;  
And Constantine in public view  
Did thank the God of heaven: 'tis true.

The story of Helen's discovery of the True Cross has captivated readers for centuries, becoming particularly popular in the Middle Ages. Around 1260 it was incorporated in the manuscript collection of saints' lives called the *Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*) by the Italian cleric Jacobus de Voragine, and it proved to be a great success. Caxton printed his edition in the 1400s and other translations were published in Europe.

For the largely illiterate population the addition of illustrations certainly helped to explain the complex tale, which starts with various characters from the Old Testament.

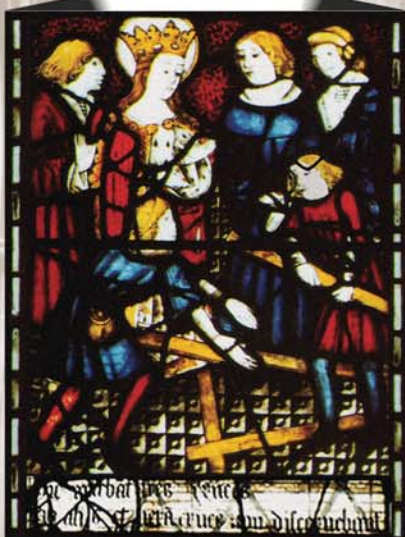
This selection of woodcuts is from a Dutch edition of 1483, reproduced in Berjeau's facsimile edition, published in London in 1863. The English translations of the captions are from T. F. Dibdin's *Bibliotheca Spenceriana* of 1814.



With the eventual, if at times reluctant cooperation of Jewish residents of Jerusalem and yet another dream, this time involving an angel, Helen claimed to have found not only the buried cross on which Jesus was crucified but also the other two from that grim day at Calvary's crucifixion. So as to determine which was the True Cross in this devotional dig, a miraculous healing – some say resurrection – was achieved with one of them, so it must, therefore, have been the *true* one. Inspired by this discovery – nearly three hundred years after the crucifixion – large sums were sourced from the Roman treasury and, taking up the role of a somewhat elderly clerk of works, Helen is said to have overseen a major building programme at the various sites connected with the life, mission and death of Jesus.

Briefing the then bishop of Jerusalem, Macarius, Constantine ordered – according to his devoted biographer Eusebius – that the new church of the Holy Sepulchre should '*surpass all others in its beauty*'. Socrates Scholasticus recorded that Constantine said in his letter to Macarius that the True Cross was '*the monument of his most holy passion, long since hidden under the earth*', discovered following the demolition of Jerusalem's pagan Temple of Venus, '*a most disgusting appendage*'. Dozens of other places of Christian worship were erected by imperial order of Helen's son, both in the Holy Land and elsewhere in the empire. Around the year 324 the new capital of Constantinople was established in what is now Istanbul in Turkey. Constantine, clearly hedging his bets with the gods, is recorded by Socrates to have placed a piece of the True Cross beneath a statue of the pagan sun god in the city. Evidently, *Sol Invictus* remained uppermost in Constantine's pantheon, regardless of what many clerics would have us believe about this emperor, who convened the Council of Nicea in 325 in the hope of achieving unanimity amongst churchmen scattered throughout the empire. This event set the framework for Christianity's future with Rome at the helm, although it did involve a few punch-ups between dissenting bishops over several issues of dogma.

## Saint Helen's Story in 15th-century Glass



One of the few medieval windows depicting Saint Helen that survived the puritanical destruction of the 17th-century, those in the parish church of Ashton-under-Lyne, Greater Manchester are fine examples of the art. They are believed to have been made in York around 1499 and transported to the Lancashire town to be installed in the church, which had been dedicated to Saint Helen. For the benefit of the largely illiterate local parishioners, the windows provided a visual account of the discovery of the True Cross in Jerusalem by Helen, a legend that enchanted people during the Middle Ages. The windows were removed for safe-keeping during the English Civil War. The great storm of 1791 and a severe fire in 1821 both took their toll on the church's windows, and they were removed again during the two world wars to protect them from further damage. Other windows were less fortunate, like the one shown on the right. Here fragments of remaining medieval glass have been assembled into a light-filled patchwork. Today's church dedication is to Saint Michael and All Angels.





Rather curiously, Eusebius does not directly mention the finding of the True Cross by Helen. Historians have forever debated why so momentous an event involving Constantine's mother should escape the attention of this learned churchman, fulsome though he is in his otherwise detailed *Vita Constantini* – *Life of Constantine*. He even declares that Constantine is immortal, which rather reflects the tone of this flattering tome. As Eusebius said himself his main focus was elsewhere: *'The design of my present undertaking leads me to speak and write of those circumstances only which have reference to his [Constantine's] religious character: and, since these are themselves of almost infinite variety, I shall select from the facts which have come to my knowledge such as are most suitable, and worthy of lasting record, and endeavour to narrate them as briefly as possible'*.

Writing about Eusebius' omission to mention Helen's discovery, one 16th-century author observed: *'he speaketh not word of this miraculous invention of the cross'*, emphasising that there is no *'such testimony in the original Greek; but it appears only in the falsified Latin version.'*<sup>24</sup> When not the sword to enforce its will, then Rome would settle for the mighty pen, or so it would appear. Nevertheless, Eusebius does acknowledge Helen's pious works, executed under the sponsorship and direction of her son Constantine, and while speaking of Bethlehem, he adds: *'For without delay she dedicated two churches to the God whom she adored, one at the grotto which had been the scene of the Saviour's birth; the other on the mount of His ascension. Accordingly the pious empress honoured with rare memorials the scene of her travail who bore this heavenly child, and beautified the sacred cave with all possible splendour'*.<sup>25</sup> A 'grotto' – a 'cave' – what happened to the more familiar stable in the nativity story-line? This is due to a mistranslation of the original Greek text, the word *kataleimna* meaning a cave or similar shelter.

The Biblical account of the nativity as we have it today was given a romano-centric spin by Constantine, whose devotion to the very ancient Mythraic Mysteries influenced perceptions of the role and nature of Jesus. When the Romans imported Mithras into their pantheon he was perceived as both a divine child and an archetypal hero figure, his sacrifice of the sacred bull being a key component in the mythology and iconography of his worship. The Christian correlation was that Jesus himself was the sacrificial victim. Further incorporations of Mithraism into Christianity included the birth feast-day of both Mithras and Jesus – 25th December. Here again the solar symbolism prevails in relation to the related *Sol Invictus* cult, with the winter solstice marking the rebirth or resurrection of the sun. Even the name of the headgear of church leaders – the mitre (Latin *Mitra*) – betrays an origin in the Asiatic cult of Mithras. Emperor Constantine left his mark on Christianity in more ways than one.

### A Mithraic interpretation of the Adoration of the Magi

Based on a 3rd-century Roman fresco in the Catacomb of Priscilla, this sketch from a 19th-century book on Christian iconography shows the Magi arriving to adore the baby Jesus. Unlike the many paintings of the later Italian Renaissance, the figures are seen wearing the Phrygian Cap associated with Mithras, who is shown here sacrificing the bull in a Roman altar scene.



ILLUSTRATION  
A.J. L'Heureux (Macario)  
*Hagioglypta Sive Picturae  
et Sculpturae Sacrae  
Antiquiores*, Paris, 1856.





In spite of the apparent silence of Eusebius on the subject of Helen actually finding the cross, a bishop of Jerusalem, Saint Cyril, appointed around 350, was more forthcoming on the matter of the then newly discovered True Cross, saying in his catechetical lectures that fragments of it were being widely distributed in his day. A 19th-century writer on the subject of what he describes as '*Cruciana*', wrote of this busy trade in Jerusalem and repeated the quite incredible legend of the production process behind it: '*The city's bishop was the keeper of the treasure, but the faithful never offered their money in vain for a fragment of the holy wood. They listened with credulity to the assurance of their priests, that a living virtue pervaded an inanimate and insensible substance, and that the cross permitted itself every day to be divided into several parts, and yet remained uninjured and entire*'.<sup>26</sup>

The empress Helen herself had, it seems, divided the actual wood she had found, sending a portion to her son Constantine at the then recently-founded Constantinople, and a further one to Rome from where yet another lively distribution centre evolved, as one writer described: '*The portion of the cross, forwarded to Rome, was divided into portions, each of which was destined to form the foundation for some new edifice, dedicated to Christianity. Over these sacred relics was built, amongst others, the magnificent edifice of St. Peter at Rome. The possession of a portion of the Holy Cross was esteemed in itself sufficient to render any spot sacred and hallowed. The cross which Helena conveyed to Rome on her return, was placed in a silver case set with gold and precious stones*'.<sup>27</sup> As we are about to discover, this particular portion was to mysteriously resurface in Rome some three hundred years later.

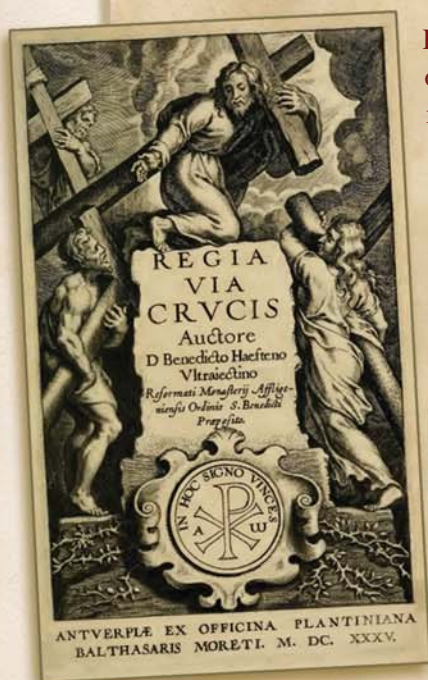
Without a suggestion of sarcasm, Helen's discovery of the cross came to be known as 'the *Invention of the Holy Cross*', which is celebrated by the various national elements of the world-wide Christian communities on different feast days. When the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was dedicated, a portion of the True Cross was placed inside. We are told that it remained there until the Persian invasion saw its removal as war booty in 614, but it was subsequently recaptured and returned in 629 by the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (c.575-641). The legends say that Heraclius had planned a triumphant entry into Jerusalem with the recovered relic, but that he found the city's gates locked against him. He then heard a heavenly voice reminding him that the 'King of Kings' had entered Jerusalem in a more modest mode, so he got off his horse, took off his shoes and walked barefoot to the gate, which then miraculously opened before him. The relic itself had been diminished somewhat before its return to Jerusalem, Heraclius having given some fragments of it to Armenian nobles, as well as a piece to a church in Caesarea. The relic's return to Jerusalem was short-lived, since Heraclius took it back to his capital of Constantinople for safe-keeping in the imperial palace, following the Arab conquest of the Holy City in 637/38.

Eye witness accounts from the 4th-century are a rarity, but there was the well-travelled pilgrim, Sylvia of Aquitaine (also known as Etheria or Egeria), whose diary was discovered in 1887, and she wrote of the newly constructed Church of the Holy Sepulchre: '*Now what can I say of the adornment of the building which Constantine under his mother's auspices embellished with gold and mosaics and precious marbles?*' Sylvia went on to describe the service in the church, saying that, '*they bring forth the case of silver gilded in which lies the holy wood of the Cross [and the pilgrims] come up one by one, bow before the table, kiss the sacred wood, and pass on*'.<sup>28</sup> Security was evidently tight: '*The bishop, as he sits, holds the extremities of the sacred wood firmly in his hands, while the deacons who stand around guard it.*'<sup>29</sup> As well they might, since it is mentioned that someone had once taken a bite out of it, and pilgrims were certainly not allowed to touch the relic with their hands.

In the Rome of Helen's day a room in her imperial palace – the Palazzo Sessoriano – had been turned into a chapel, eventually becoming the location of the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem. It was not, of course, in Jerusalem but Rome, having acquired the Holy Land's place-name because tradition says that the floor of the basilica was spread with a ship-load of soil from Jerusalem itself. In the basilica's relic chapel, amongst various dubious items, are three small fragments of the cross, a larger portion having been removed in 1629 to Saint Peter's Basilica by order of Pope Urban VIII.



## LEGEND AND LITERATURE



Helen's discovery of the True Cross remained an ever popular theme throughout the centuries, this book from 1635 having been published by the successful printing company of Officina Plantiniana of Antwerp. The title page (left) incorporates the Chi-Rho symbol. The page shown

below pictures Helen receiving divine guidance on which was the True Cross. Even in the 20th-century the story was told yet again, this time by the English writer Evelyn Waugh, whose novel *Helena* was published in 1950.



During the 1700s a German traveller recorded his views and impressions of Helen's famous basilica in Rome, but as a Protestant he took a fairly cynical stance on the remarkable number and variety of relics. These included a nail from the crucifixion, as well as the multi-lingual inscription (Latin *Titulus Crucis*) that was claimed to have been fitted to the cross, stating, 'Here is the king of the Jews'. The German writer commented on other items as follows: *'In this church they likewise pretend to show one of the pieces of money for which Judas betrayed our Saviour [...] but there is no certainty that Judas was paid in that coin; or that this or that piece was one of those used on that traitorous occasion'*. He goes on to record a discriminatory tradition at the basilica itself: *'No female is permitted to enter this chapel except on the 20th of March, which is the anniversary festival of the consecration of the church; and then no men are admitted'*.<sup>30</sup>

The English historian John Capgrave also visited the basilica during his pilgrimage to Rome in 1449-50, and he saw for himself the relic of the True Cross housed within. He describes it as *'a great piece of the cross that our lord suffered passion upon'*, but then adds that he also saw in the same location a piece *'of the cross on which the thief hung that was on the right side'*<sup>31</sup> of Jesus at the crucifixion. It would appear from this that the ageing Helen collected a fair bit of timber from her 'invention' in Jerusalem, and one can only wonder why she bothered with the other two crosses, the so-called thieves being unworthy of veneration. Theft was not of itself a capital offence warranting crucifixion in the first century of the Roman Empire, unless through acts of piracy and the gospels do not refer to pirates. There was probably the potential for fragments of the thieves' crosses being passed off as the genuine article during later times, when the highly profitable trade in relics was rampant in the Middle East and Europe. Emperor Constantine abolished crucifixion throughout the empire in 337 out of respect for Jesus.

The Pope Sergius I (c.650-701) had a chance encounter with a piece of Helen's handiwork, and it was probably the silver reliquary previously described as being deposited in Rome by Helen herself. The pope's discovery is recorded in a chronicle by the English Benedictine monk, Orderic Vitalis (1075-c.1142): *'Pope Sergius, by a divine revelation, discovered in the sanctuary of the church of the blessed apostle Peter, a*



*silver casket which had remained for a long while forgotten in a dark corner, and which enclosed a crucifix ornamented with precious stones. Having unfolded coverings studded with gems of remarkable size, he perceived that there was inserted in the crucifix a portion of the wood of the life-giving cross of Christ*'.<sup>32</sup>

So what exactly did Helen unearth? Recorded history is silent on the wooden object itself and, not surprisingly, no contemporary detailed descriptions of its appearance, size and so on exists; bearing in mind that it had spent several hundred years underground, we are led to believe. Would not the Romans have simply recycled crosses for subsequent use? And Jewish residents of Jerusalem are unlikely to have shown much interest in preserving such hateful objects by burying them. The influential humanist and religious reformer, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) cynically commented that there were enough fragments of the True Cross to build a whole ship. Another influential theologian of the time, the French John Calvin (1509-1564), echoed this jibe, commenting that if *'a man would gather together all that has been found of this cross, there would be enough to freight a great ship'*, adding in full Reformation flow, *'there is not so wicked an abbey where there is none of it to be shown'*.<sup>33</sup>

Calvin would probably have found the Cistercian Meaux Abbey (also known as Melsa, founded in 1151) in Yorkshire particularly *'wicked'* because of their remarkably large collection of relics, as their schedule reports: *'part of the true cross, within a cross, in a little case of leather; part of the wood on which our Lord stood; part of the cross of the Lord, placed within a little silver cross'*.<sup>34</sup> And that was just the True Cross relics. The rest of the collection included – improbably enough – bits of Mary Magdalene's hair and the dust of her bones, plus some of John the Baptist's hair. There was even a bit of the table from the Last Supper and also a part of the vest of Saint Neot. This last item may have entered the relic trade when the saint's remains were stolen from Cornwall and taken to Huntingdonshire. Needless to say, such an abundance of relics provided a cash-crop, harvested by the monks from the devotional offerings of pilgrims and other visitors to the abbey in the Middle Ages. It was just one of many ecclesiastical institutions exploiting this flow of funds. Little wonder that reformation of Christian worship was in the air.

Was the ship-building scepticism of Erasmus and Calvin an exaggeration? It was several centuries later when a French architect, Charles Rohault de Fleury (1801-1875) decided to devote his retirement to studying Christian relics. In 1870 he published the findings of his thoroughly comprehensive and fairly objective research into just how many significant fragments of this cross existed, how big they were and where they were located.<sup>35</sup> It was reported that it all amounted to just over six cubic feet.<sup>36</sup> Even allowing for lost bits and otherwise unknown fragments, this would hardly amount to a huge quantity of timber.

The French study is not confined to the True Cross relics and the author explores the various other items associated with the crucifixion, including the Crown of Thorns placed on the head of Jesus, and also the spear which pierced his side while he was on the cross. Charles Rohault de Fleury's work (pictured right) contains not only his own observations but also copious letters from various individuals, each providing a claimed provenance for the particular relics in their possession. We shall examine these testimonies in the last chapter of this book, as we finally narrow down the potential fate of the *Welsh Cross*, which by the 19th-century no longer existed in a form we shall come to recognise. Nevertheless, the actual relic's survival is a distinct possibility, but more on that later when this journal of a pilgrimage draws to its conclusion in chapter 9.

## TRUE CROSS RESEARCH

After many years of research, Charles Rohault de Fleury published his findings in 1870, the resulting book being the first to examine in great detail the various relics of the True Cross.





## The Guild Chapel

### Stratford-upon-Avon

Stratford's Guild of the Holy Cross built its chapel in the 13th-century and like others at the time it was decorated with paintings, depicting biblical scenes for the edification of those attending services in this medieval building.



LEFT Known as the 'Doom', the painting above the chancel arch was a stern reminder of the Day of Judgement, and other pictures in the chapel displayed images in the often macabre style of the time.



When the Reformation led to these and countless other church paintings disappearing under layers of white wash, their future was literally sealed for ever. Fortunately, during restoration work at the beginning of the 19th-century, those in Stratford's Guild Chapel were revealed once more, albeit in a poor state. It was the antiquary John Fisher (1772-1836) who went in and recorded the imagery for publication in a facsimile edition, prior to most of the paintings being lost. Based on one of the paintings, the drawing above depicts Saint Helen testing the crosses to establish which was the True Cross. Here the design used is that of the Tau Cross, symbolically associated with the Staurogram.

DRAWING *The Legendary History of The Cross* by John Ashton, 1887.





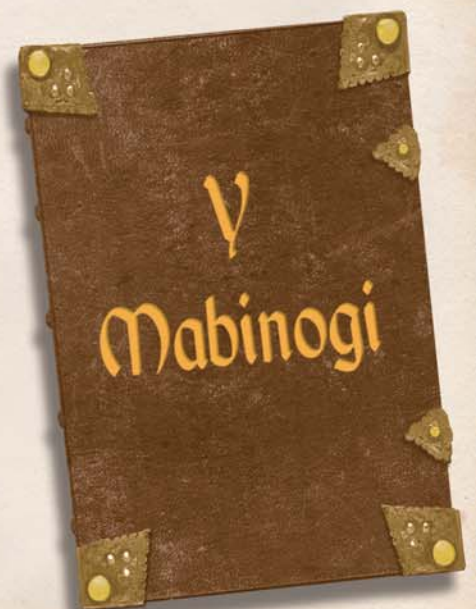
The French study was to be followed in the 1890s by another publication, this time undertaken by a priest named James Bellord, whose research paper was published by the Catholic Truth Society in London. Bellord's work leans heavily on the labours of his French predecessor's studious investigations; at least when he finally moves on from a lengthy anti-Protestant rant. Taking into account all known references to the then existing relics, and also the lost substantial fragments with known, albeit estimated dimensions, careful calculations arrived at the conclusion that there would not be enough to build a small canoe, let alone the ship that the reformers Erasmus and Calvin had in mind. In amongst the various tables showing the cubic volume of the differing fragments, Bellord notes that, *'the vast majority of the relics are exceedingly small, and the multitudes in private possession which are never catalogued are simply infinitesimal in size, and often require a magnifying glass to make them clearly visible'*. Bellord concluded that, *'the marvel then is not that there should be so many relics existing, but that there should be so exceedingly few [...] even making allowance for the wholesale destruction wrought by [...] the Protestant Reformation'*.<sup>37</sup>

So, it would appear that those two heroes of the Reformation, Erasmus and Calvin, had their own agendas on the highly controversial subject of relics in general and the Holy Cross fragments in particular. The destruction wrought during that period of history did incalculable damage, as medieval church paintings, for example, were smothered beneath white wash. Such was the fate of those at the Guild Chapel in Stratford in 1563, when John Shakespeare – the playwright's father – supervised the task in his role as a senior member of the town's corporation.

Relics of the True Cross, even a tiny bit of it, were highly prized and the nobility throughout history have been thrilled to receive such a gift. One such appeared in the possession of the nobility of the royal house of Gwynedd, but that ultimately tragic tale must await our arrival in the Middle Ages, when the *Welsh Cross* finally emerges into documented history. However, it is worth noting at this point, especially in relation to the foregoing 19th-century research into the actual cross fragments themselves, that many medieval chroniclers described the Welsh relic as *'a large portion of the cross'*. What was actually meant by *'large'* is not, unfortunately, recorded in detail in the chronicles, but we shall return to this size issue later.

In the meantime, we remain in the Roman province of Britannia to explore its connection with Elen, who is thought by some to have been a princess amongst the Britons of the royal house of Siluria in what is now southern Wales and surrounding areas. We shall demonstrate that this saintly woman was actually from Gwynedd in North Wales, using both recorded history and interpretations of folk-memory to support this statement. There are around 135 churches dedicated to 'Helen' in Britain as a whole, but just to complicate matters, we also know that there was the other, similarly-named woman around in the 300s – Elen. We encountered her earlier as the individual called Elen Luyddog and her story is told in the *Mabinogion* (Welsh *Mabinogi*), a collection of old Welsh prose that would have started life in the annals of folk-memory, before being written down in medieval times.

These stories represent our next signpost on the pilgrims' path towards exploring the mystery of the *Welsh Cross*, and one tale in particular is the love story between a princess and an emperor.





# SAINT ELEN

## Luyddog of Caernarfon







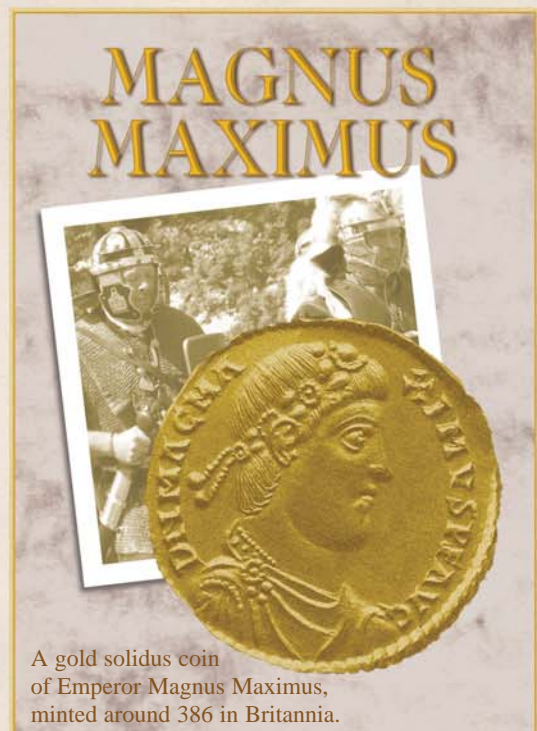
With the *Mabinogion* we enter the magical realm of ancient Welsh folk-memory. It is a collection of eleven stories that were collated together from old manuscripts, notably the *Red Book of Hergest* and the *White Book of Rhydderch*, dating from the 14th-century when these much older Celtic tales were written down. The daughter of an English earl, Lady Charlotte Guest (1812-1895) was the first to translate the collection of texts into English and publish the *Mabinogion*, giving this compilation a long-overdue, wider cultural airing. In the three-volume edition of 1849, she introduces the enterprise by saying, '*I have ventured upon this undertaking in order to gratify the desire so generally and repeatedly expressed for the publication of these interesting remains. (29th August 1838)*'.<sup>1</sup> Prior to Guest's publication these ancient stories were little known beyond the circles of Welsh historians and antiquaries, and while the quality of her translations and interpretations remain debated her contribution to promoting these literary treasures was considerable.

The story that mainly concerns us is that known as *The Dream of Macsen Wledig*, the tale having been first published in Welsh in 1806. Macsen's cognomen of Wledig is derived from a Welsh word that anciently referred to the ruler of a country, according to the dictionary of Thomas Richards (1815 edition). The source word is *gwledig*, which nowadays is used to relate to the countryside in the general rural sense. A much more recent scholar, the late Rachel Bromwich, interpreted the word (sometimes given as 'Guletic') as indicating a leader of a native or local militia, such as a warlord character from the Romano-British period. Macsen is the military man known to classical history as the usurping Roman Emperor Magnus Maximus, who is generally believed to have been born in Spain around 335.

The Latin writers who were contemporaries of Magnus Maximus do not provide a great deal of information about him, although he is known to have served under the military leader Theodosius the Elder during the campaigns to protect the province of Britannia in the 360s. The 4th-century Roman soldier and historian, Ammianus Marcellinus noted for the year 364 that, '*the Picts, Scots, Saxons and Atacotti harassed the Britons with incessant invasions.*'<sup>2</sup> Some writers say that Maximus was the nephew of the elder Theodosius, and he evidently held high military office during those attempts to rescue Britannia from the marauding bands of invaders. One of the military units under his command was known as the *Seguntioneses*, thought by some to link them with Segontium, where they may have been stationed at the time.

The originally 9th-century *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry under the year 381 claims that Maximus was actually born in Britain. The 6th-century British monk Gildas described how Britannia '*sent forth among the Gauls that bitter scion of her own planting, Maximus, with a great number of followers*'. This description of Maximus may be implying that he was of British root-stock. The use of the word 'scion' is figurative to suggest an heir or descendent, since Gildas uses the Latin word *germen* to indicate a branch or offshoot, as used for grafting or planting: '*Germen Plantationis Britannicae*' – a branch of the Britannic plantation. A similar usage appears in Old English with the word 'kith' to mean something sprouting, like a cutting, and from this we derive the expression 'kith and kin' when referring to family and other relatives. What Gildas was driving at remains ambiguous and in all probability he was simply saying that Britannia was responsible for elevating Maximus, since he 'sprouted' from there to pursue his imperial ambitions via Gaul.

The Roman writer and former tutor to the emperor Gratian, Ausonius was a contemporary of Maximus, whom he



A gold solidus coin of Emperor Magnus Maximus, minted around 386 in Britannia.



dismissed as ‘*a menial hanger-on*’ at court and also ‘*the thief of Rutupiae*’ (Latin *Rutupinum Latronem*). Here too a connection is being made with Britain. Rutupiae was the major cross-channel fortified port in Kent that is now the town of Richborough, and it remained an important maritime and military base on what the Romans defensively termed the ‘Saxon Shore’ during their occupation of Britain.

Whatever his familial origin – Hispania or Britannia – Maximus is extensively recorded as gathering together the legions stationed in Britain, conscripting local warriors and being proclaimed by these troops as their emperor in the year 383. The contemporary Latin historian Orosius claimed that Maximus was reluctant to accept the honour, although he evidently did so. Another contemporary, Ambrose the Bishop of Milan said that Maximus himself told him that he had large numbers of *foederati* in his fighting force. These troops were not in the regular army, but nevertheless on the emperor’s payroll as mercenaries. According to the near-contemporary Prosper Tiro, from the Roman province of Aquitaine in Gaul, all these troops contributed to defeating incursions by Picts and Scots in 382, just prior to Maximus sailing from Rutupiae with his expeditionary force, which, according to the *Mabinogion* and other sources included *foederati* from Britannia. Reluctant or otherwise, Maximus embarked for Gaul to grasp the imperial purple mantle for himself.

Not surprisingly, the then current emperor of the Western Empire, Gratian was greatly alarmed by this turn of events. Following the defeat of his army, Gratian was captured and executed by Maximus at Lyon in 383. Equally alarmed by the situation, Gratian’s co-emperor and half-brother, the young Valentinian was anxiously awaiting developments from his base at Milan, and he sent the diocesan Bishop Ambrose to Trier where Maximus had set up his court. After a meeting with the self-proclaimed emperor, Ambrose wrote to Valentinian advising him to be on his guard against Maximus, ‘*a man who conceals war under the cloak of peace.*’<sup>3</sup> By the time Maximus crossed the Alps into Italy with his army in 387, Valentinian and his mother knew it was time to flee to the comparative safety of the Eastern Empire’s capital at Constantinople, where they sought the protection of Emperor Theodosius. In 380 Theodosius had issued the *Edict of Thessalonica*, making Roman Catholicism the official and universal religion of the whole empire.

Meanwhile Maximus was making powerful enemies among the land-owning aristocracy of the western provinces of Gaul and Spain, his avaricious activities coming in for widespread condemnation. As a general in the Roman army in 381, Maximus is said by the Northumbrian monk Bede to have incited the Goths to rebellion by his avarice, although Bede does describe Maximus as a ‘*brave and upright man*’ before condemning him as an oath-breaking usurper. In Rome itself the reputation of Maximus was far from glowing, and the contemporary Latin panegyrist, Pacatus Drepanius delivered an oration in the senate describing how the ‘*British thugs*’ – the *foederati* – of Maximus had behaved cruelly towards prisoners from Gratian’s forces. Pacatus was gushingly full of praise towards Theodosius in this panegyric, so the enemy was inevitably demonised for emotional impact on the senatorial audience listening to this flattering speech.

The contemporary churchman from Constantinople, Socrates Scholasticus saw that the end was nigh for Maximus, against whom Theodosius had sent a formidable army. So formidable that Socrates said that the troops of Maximus then lost faith in the usurper’s cause and delivered him bound into the hands of Theodosius. Another contemporary, the Latin poet Claudian claimed that Theodosius was inclined to spare the life of Maximus, but the troops had other ideas. Maximus was captured in 388 at Aquileia in northern Italy and executed. Such was the rise and fall of Maximus, as accounted for by the principle Latin writers of the time, but what of this emperor in the Welsh records, where he is referred to as Macsen?

In the Vale of Llangollen in North Wales stands the 9th-century monument known as the Pillar of Eliseg (page 58), and amongst its now eroded inscriptions it referred to ‘*Maximus the king, who killed the king of the Romans*’. It is not absolutely certain if, from a couple of similarly-named Roman characters this is the Macsen from the *Mabinogion*, but the likelihood remains, given that he was responsible for killing Emperor Gratian. Eliseg’s pillar incorporated genealogical records of a Welsh royal family of the ancient kingdom of Powys and along with similar, later manuscript pedigrees claims of descent from Macsen feature in the dynastic family trees. Evidently, the usurping emperor contributed his genes to the Britons through his



partner Elen Luyddog of the royal house of Gwynedd, and their encounter is the focus of the tale in the *Mabinogion*.

We shall briefly examine the ‘love story’ from the *Mabinogion*, which centres on Macsen having a dream of a strikingly beautiful woman, who is described in Guest’s translation: ‘*And he saw a maiden sitting before him in a chair of ruddy gold. Not more easy than to gaze upon the sun when brightest, was it to look upon her by reason of her beauty*’. Again we find allusion to the archetypal solar theme, which links to the name Helen itself and its Welsh equivalent, the Elen under discussion. Modern Welsh has the word *haul* to denote the sun itself, and the personal names Elen/Helen ultimately derive from the ancient Greek sun god’s name, Helios. By way of illustration, the female personal name Heulwen translates from Welsh as meaning sunshine, the feminine word-element *wen* (masculine – *wyn*) being used in many instances to indicate something that is white and/or holy in character. In his 1802 book of *Observations* on Snowdonia, William Williams commented on the Welsh name Elen, saying that it was popular among the ancient Britons, and in his own era the expression ‘*Ei Elen O – his Elen*’ was still widely used as a compliment to a man who had a beautiful wife.

Continuing with the *Mabinogion* story, we find that Macsen simply had to possess the beautiful woman of his dream, so he sent emissaries throughout the empire to search for her. Eventually she was found at the royal court in ‘*Caer Aber Saint*’ (Segontium/Caernarfon), her name being Elen, the daughter of the ruler called Eudaf Hen ap Caradog; *ap* indicates son. One of Segontium’s several historic names was *Caer Eudaf* (Eudaf’s Fort), and the poet Lewis Mon calls Caernarfon ‘*Eudaf’s Town*’ in a poem of around 1500, addressed to his patron John Puleston. It will be recalled that we previously encountered the ‘old’ (Welsh *Hen*) appellation in connection with the Colchester story-line of Constantine’s mother Helen and her alleged father, ‘Old King Coel’, although this does not necessarily indicate a conflation between Eudaf and Coel. Conflation should not be ruled out, however, and it was the Anglo-Normans Henry of Huntingdon and Geoffrey of Monmouth who first promulgated the ‘history’ of Coel and his daughter Helen originating in England’s city of Colchester, as previously discussed.

Since the respective daughters (Elen and Helen) were heavily conflated, and all the characters were of the 4th-century, it is certainly conceivable that early medieval writers have conflated this group as a whole. This was either through ignorance or to simply embellish, or even Anglo-Normanise the originally British/Welsh stories, passing them off as ‘English History’ to culturally legitimise their ruling elite. Both Henry and Geoffrey were compiling their history books within just decades of the Norman Conquest of 1066,

## Eliseg’s Pillar



Standing in the Vale of Llangollen, Eliseg’s Pillar was erected in the 800s by Cyngen, a prince of Powys, as a memorial to his ancestor Eliseg. In a war lasting some nine years, the king drove out the Anglo-Saxons from the area of Powys. Before the centuries and the elements took their toll, inscribed on it was a royal family record.

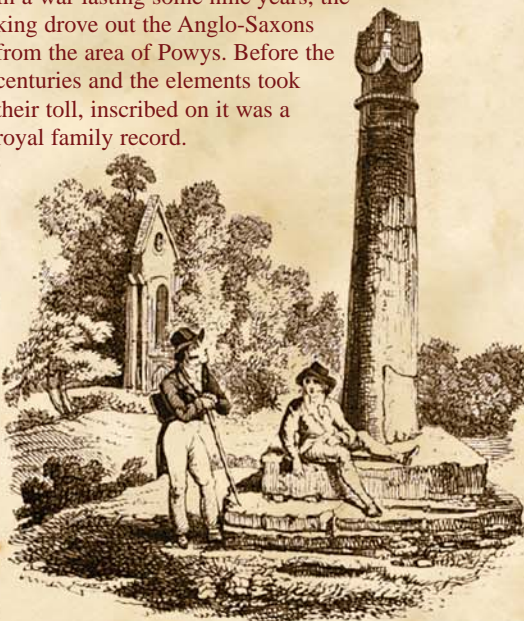


ILLUSTRATION from *The Table Book* by W. Hone, 1827.



and patronage – whether ecclesiastical or baronial – would definitely keep the ink flowing to meet the aspirations of their readership. Such a cultural literary ‘rip-off’ would have served their purpose well, the Welsh at the time being simply an irritating enemy on Britain’s western seaboard.

In the *Mabinogion* we are told that the emissaries explained to Elen that the emperor of Rome wished to have her for his wife, asking whether she would prefer to go to Rome, or have Maccsen come to her in Britannia. She chose the latter and he duly arrived, the woman in the dream being confirmed as this princess Elen, Eudaf’s daughter. She consented to marriage and asked as a ‘maiden fee’ (she was a virgin) for her father to receive the island of Britain from the English Channel to the Irish Sea, plus three adjacent islands to be held by herself as empress of Rome. Nennius mentions that the ancient kings of Britain were said ‘proverbially’ to have also ruled over three islands: Wight, Man and Orkney. The implication appears to be that the kings ruled from the southern most Isle of Wight, through the middle to Man and as far north as Orkney, thereby ruling Britain *overall*. Why Elen as empress should hold these islands for herself is unclear from the text.

In addition to these requests, Elen desired that three fortresses (Welsh *Caer*) should be built for her, one being at Caernarfon (Segontium), another at Caerllion (Caerleon-on-Usk) and finally one at Caerfyrddin

(Carmarthen). This grouping of three mirrors the ancient thematic structure of the Welsh Triads, brief literary frameworks whereby three, usually related things are recorded as of historic, cultural or other significance. The Triads preserve from folk-memory information assets in a kind of aphorism, stemming from the tradition of the Celtic bard, and both Elen and Maccsen are briefly mentioned in these ancient records of Welsh history, as we shall see.

As well as the fortresses, Elen is said to have had roads built to link them, so like her namesake, Helen the partner of Constantius, she was something of a clerk of works, engaged in military and civil engineering, rather than ecclesiastical buildings that preoccupied Helen and her son Constantine the Great in the Roman Empire. As both of these 4th-century women were particularly engaged in building enterprises, that would provide yet more fuel to feed the flames of conflation through history. Another contributing association between the two women lies in a rather curious mention of soil in the *Mabinogion* story. It will be recalled from the previous chapter

(page 50) how Helen had a ship-load of soil from Jerusalem spread upon the floor of her palatial basilica in Rome. In the *The Dream of Maccsen Wledig* this legendary action by the mother of Constantine the Great is echoed, only soil is shipped from Rome to North Wales so that Maccsen would feel more comfortable and at home. This strange act gets only a fleeting mention in the story and does not seem to have any particular relevance in the narrative, so it is quite possible that the Welsh story-teller knew of the famous action by Helen and thought something similar might enhance his tale of imperial dreams and Elen of the *Mabinogion*.

The roads that Elen required of her partner Maccsen are known to this day as Sarn Helen, and while it would be more accurate to refer to them as Sarn Elen, for the sake of familiarity and continuity we shall retain the well-known anglicised name as it appears on maps and in books. The Welsh word *sarn* refers specifically to the mode of construction, with 19th-century dictionaries giving the English word causeway as the equivalent translation. For example: ‘*Sarnawl – strewing as a crust, or pavement, like a causeway*’ (1832). Another dictionary definition gives ‘*Sarnu – to strew, to spread*’ (1815), while a Welsh dictionary from 1547 simply offers ‘*steppe*’ (i.e. step) as the meaning of *sarn*. This brief 16th-century definition is intended to suggest slabs of stone to indicate a hard-surfaced covering material, and in an article of 1693 the antiquary Edward Llwyd



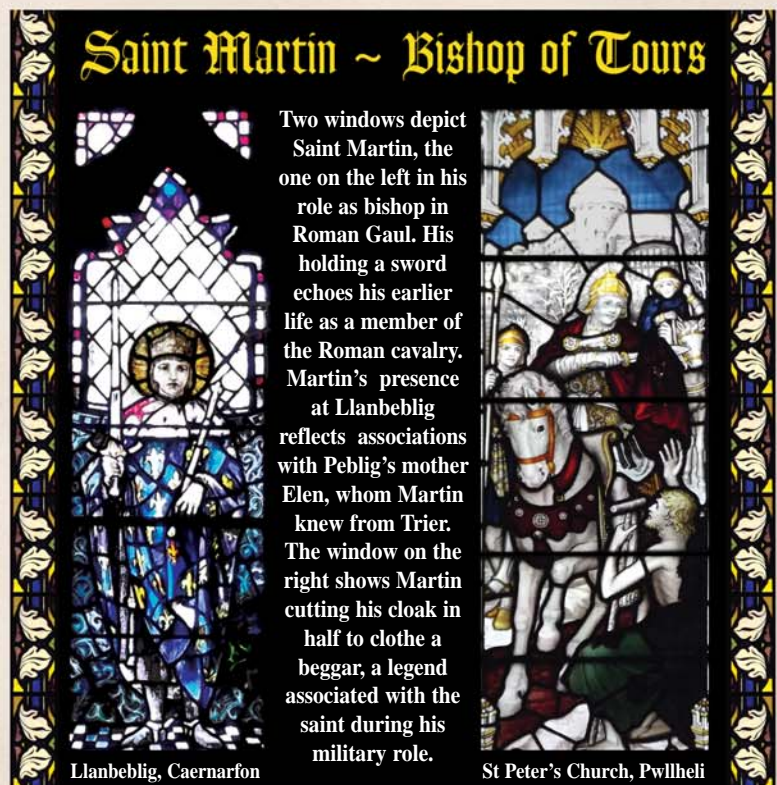


(1660-1709) refers to Sarn Helen in the Berwyn mountain range as 'Elen's step'.

In Thomas Morgan's *Origin of Place-Names in Wales and Monmouthshire* (1912), we find the word sarn incorporated in village names, and he cites one in Llein (Gwynedd), where six roads converge on the small hamlet called Sarn. There is a similarly-named village in Gwynedd near the town of Bala called Sarnau, indicating the plural of sarn. Morgan also refers to the mid-Wales place-name of Talsarn: 'the name signifies the end of the Roman road. Sarn y Cyfiawn, the highway of the righteous'. There is also a Talsarnau just north of Harlech. Morgan also goes on to briefly mention Sarn Helen itself, and we shall examine the writings of others who set out to explore this ancient road network in Wales. Before doing so we should return to our key characters, Maccsen and Elen to give this sarn its context in history.

Just as King Arthur is often dismissed as 'mythological', so too is Elen Luyddog because of the paucity of contemporary references, especially those of the Latin writers with their high credibility rating in the romano-centric idealisation of antiquarian scholarship. Following the execution of Maximus, the Latin sources tell us that Emperor Theodosius also killed the usurper's young son Victor, who had shared the imperial throne with his father. Victor was at the court in Trier when he was strangled shortly after Maximus died, but it is not known where Elen was during these savage events in the autumn of 388. According to the Welsh sources Elen and Maccsen did have children and the saintly Cystennin and Peblig were encountered in the previous chapter. After the death of Maximus two of his daughters are referred to in a letter (dated December 388) to Theodosius from Milan's Bishop Ambrose, who was seeking clemency in an unrelated matter. Ambrose pleadingly reminded Theodosius that he had given the two daughters of Maximus to 'a relative to be raised', and also how the emperor had given money for the support of the usurper's mother, an act of generosity that Pacatus Drepanius also mentions in his flattering panegyric. The murder of the young Victor was intended to thwart any dynastic ambitions in the future, but the boy's mother would not necessarily have been seen by Theodosius as much of a threat, women being perceived as having only a 'walk-on' part in the imperial theatre of war. There was nothing Elen could do about the unfolding situation, apart from keeping out of the way of the emperor's vengeance, so as to protect herself and her children.

Neither Ambrose nor Pacatus name the wife or partner of Maximus. This is somewhat surprising since she was after all an empress, albeit wedded to a short-lived usurping emperor. We do, however, find a reference to this empress in a biography by another Latin contemporary, Sulpicius Severus, a Roman lawyer. He was writing about Saint Martin, the Bishop of Tours in Gaul, who had previously been an active soldier as a member of the imperial guard. Martin frequently visited the court of Maximus at Trier and the empress was regularly present on those occasions. With frustrating inevitability her name is not recorded, only that she was 'a truly blessed woman', who clearly made a deep impression on Martin for her devotional Christian piety and hospitality with great humility. Since we know that Elen achieved saintly status in her own land – but not in Rome – Sulpicius Severus may well be describing this woman from Britannia in his writings, where she is referred to in *Dialogue II*.



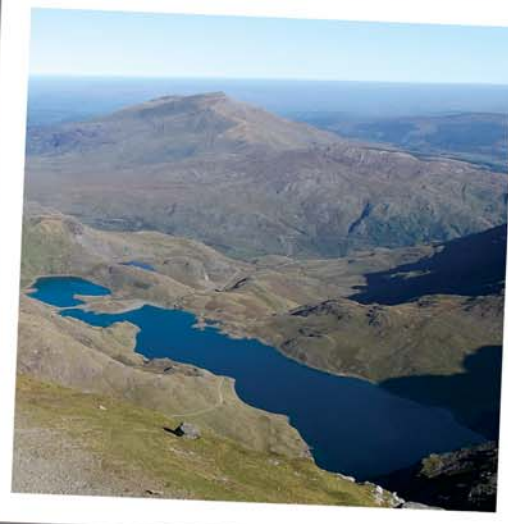


# Eryri ~ The Land of Enchantment



**Yr Wyddfa**  
(Snowdon)

Drayton's  
17th-century  
map of  
Snowdonia  
(Eryri)



**Llyn Llydaw**

The region around  
Snowdon is filled with  
folk-memories of the  
exploits of King Arthur  
and his knights.

**YR WYDDFA**  
(‘The burial mound’?)  
Snowdon

**Bwlch y Saethau** *Pass of the Arrows*

**Y LLIWEDD**

**Cwm Llan** • *Camlan?*

A4086

A498



**Y Lliwedd**



While the focus of this narrative is on Elen, the old genealogical sources present some significant challenges when considering the marital and parental activities of Maximus. From his relationship with Elen were born the children Cystennin, Peblig and a daughter named Sevira, and possibly another son named Owain. In 368 Britannia was being invaded from all sides and Roman control of its province was swiftly disintegrating. Theodosius the Elder had crossed the English Channel with a large relief army, which probably included his son (later Emperor Theodosius I) and also Magnus Maximus, who was back in Britannia in 380 in a more elevated role as a Roman general. So, exactly when he embarked on the relationship with Elen is not recorded, but such chronological points would not have bothered the writer of the tale in the *Mabinogion*, since it was essentially a love story rather than a thesis on Britain's military history.

An unsavoury event at the end of the tale from the *Mabinogion* is provided from Guest's translation, describing a savage attempt at linguistic preservation through amputation: '*And they took counsel and cut out the tongues of the women, lest they should corrupt their speech. And because of the silence of the women from their own speech, the men of Armorica are called Britons*'. It remains a rather puzzling statement. With the help of British forces, aided by Elen's brother Cynan/Conan, Maximus had overcome the opposition in the form of Gratian, so in gratitude for the Britons' help Maximus awarded them territory in the province of Gaul around the year 383. This was the area known as Armorica that we now call Brittany, and it was once known as 'Little Britain'. Centuries later, at the papal Council of Tours in 567 an edict was issued seeking to control the consecration of bishops in this independently-minded region, referring to the influx of newcomers as '*Romans*' to distinguish them from the original Armoricans.

Gildas, the British cleric writing in the post-Roman 6th-century recorded the exodus of these warrior Britons into Brittany, and he blames the loss of these Celtic military forces for Britain's subsequent vulnerability to invasions, particularly from the north of the island: '*After this, Britain is left deprived of all her soldiery and armed bands, of her cruel governors, and of the flower of her youth, who went with Maximus, but never again returned; and utterly ignorant as she was of the art of war, groaned in amazement for many years under the cruelty of two foreign nations: the Scots from the north west, and the Picts from the north*'.<sup>4</sup> The Scots from whom the nation and land are so named were conquering migrants from Ireland, from where many Irish people also travelled and settled in areas of coastal Wales in the so-called Dark Ages.

The chronicler and Welsh priest, Adam of Usk (c.1352-1430) travelled extensively and he recorded how that when in Rome in 1404 he met Greeks from Constantinople: '*From these Greeks I learned that the princes of Greece were fully descended from the said Constantine and his three uncles, Trehern, Llywelyn, and Meric, and from other thirty thousand Britons who were carried thither from Britain with him*'.<sup>5</sup> Once again we encounter names of British/Welsh origin in this account of military migration into Europe, as well as that of yet another Constantine.

The early colonisation of Brittany by Britons also appears in the 9th-century *Historia Brittonum*, attributed to Nennius, and the Breton language certainly shows this migratory legacy. The name of an area of Brittany called Cornouaille (Breton *Kernev*) is cognate with that of Cornwall (Cornish *Kernow*) and today's archaeology confirms that waves of migration into Brittany took place, spanning several centuries of the first millennium. The regular Welsh name for Brittany is Llydaw, but the precise derivation of this is uncertain, although one, barely tenable suggestion is that it is a combination of the Welsh words for half and silent in reference to the oral mutilation of the women described in the *Mabinogion* story.

In his *Celtic Folklore* (1901 edition) Sir John Rhys suggests Llydaw may have originally referred to an area in South Wales, although modern scholarship finds this questionable. However, there is the Snowdonia lake Llyn Llydaw, located in Gwynedd in North Wales, 19th-century archaeology having revealed an ancient settlement of lake-dwellers in that location below Snowdon itself. A mysterious aspect of Llyn Llydaw is its colour, a greenish hue that is generally thought to be due to deposits of copper in the surrounding rocks. This can be discounted when considering the following from a detailed professional survey and water analysis undertaken in the 20th-century: '*Llyn Llydaw is of a markedly green or light blue colour, and this is usually*



ascribed here to the presence of copper [...] not a trace of copper was found on analysis in the water of this lake'.<sup>6</sup> This lake continues to hold its colourful secret.

It was in the area of Snowdon that Welsh folk-memory records that King Arthur was fatally wounded in battle at Bwlch y Saethau (Pass of the Arrows), between Llyn Llydaw and Snowdon itself, as indicated in the map on page 61. The spot was marked by a cairn, a piled-stone monument known as Carnedd Arthur, the tradition being recorded in the Welsh history studies of Owen Jones published in 1875. When considering the Welsh name for Snowdon (Y Wyddfa) at the beginning of the 19th-century, William Williams hints at this association with a monument to Arthur: '*Gwyddfa, or Y Wyddfa, signifies literally Gwydd-fan: Gwydd means presence, and fan, or Man, Place; so that Gwyddfa may be rendered, the conspicuous Place or Object. Gwyddfa means also a Monument*'.<sup>7</sup> And gwydd is a word we shall return to shortly, as we search for Elen in the ancient Welsh landscape.

Close to Snowdon stands the mountain called Y Lliwedd, a name which has not been satisfactorily explained, and the book *Place Names in Snowdonia* suggests that it may have something to do with colour, which is pertinent given that the mountain towers over Llyn Llydaw with its mysterious colouring. Some Arthurian stories say that 'Sir Bedivere' (from the Welsh *Bedwyr*) threw Arthur's sword Excalibur into Llyn Llydaw, and it could be tempting to ponder if this accounts *somehow* for the lake's mysterious colouring. Folk-memory says that Arthur's knights are concealed in a cave at Y Lliwedd, and there they slumber, awaiting the call to arms by the Britons and their '*Once and Future King*'. On page 61 is reproduced a detail from Michael Drayton's curious map of 1620, and the cave is shown at the base of Snowdon, on which is perched the figure of a shepherd. The scene of the actual battle is said to have been at nearby Cwm Llan. Given all the other Arthurian topographical references here, could it be that Cwm Llan is the legendary Camlan where Arthur was mortally wounded in battle? The earliest reference to the battle appears in the 10th-century *Annales Cambriae* (*Annals of Wales*), citing the year 537 for when Arthur and Medraut (Mordred) perished. It is all pure speculation, so perhaps we should concentrate on our equally elusive heroine from the *Mabinogion*.

As observed by many historians, Elen and Helen have become conflated through the murky depths of time, the distinctions between the two women having become somewhat blurred. In our present Information Age it is difficult to fully appreciate how such a thing could happen, but for a thousand years or more the *Wikipedia* of the day was just monks copying one borrowed manuscript after another, or simply writing down folk-memories from pilgrims and the like, as they passed through monastic settlements. In Wales the bards and other story-tellers roamed the land, enchanting listeners with their fabulous tales of real and imagined characters and their fantastic deeds. Only a few decades separate the characters known as Saint Elen of Caernarfon and Saint Helen of Constantinople and The Cross, a calculation based on what literature – either Welsh, Latin or English – is available to us today. It is all rather approximate, although they do appear to be close contemporaries. That alone could contribute to their becoming confused in the oral tradition of folk-memory, along with the personal name issue, saintly status and Roman imperial connections. Also both had sons named Constantine (Cystennin), so it all accumulated to spark a conflagration of conflation in the Britannia of the Dark Ages.

The Anglesey-born antiquary Lewis Morris (1700/1-1765) considered this conflation issue in his work *Celtic Remains* (finally published in 1878), particularly when making comparisons between the 12th-century Latin output of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the historic work of the Welsh Saint Tysilio, who died around 640 having preached extensively in Anglesey and later Brittany. Morris concluded that Geoffrey did not mention Elen because '*the two Helens, I suppose, having confounded him*'. Many have been confounded before and since by '*the two Helens*', one of whom was, of course, the Welsh Elen.

Several modern writers explore the conflation aspect of the stories and legends, and in the recent book, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (2008), the author says: '*Certain characters such as Helen (the mother of Constantine the Great) and Thecla of Iconium appear to have been amalgamated into*



Welsh tradition because of the similarity between their names and the names of Welsh characters (Elen and Tegla). St Helen became conflated with Elen Luyddog, a mythological character who marries the Roman Emperor Macsen Wledig (Magnus Maximus) in the Middle Welsh tale *Breudwyt Maxen* [The Dream of Macsen Wledig]. *The Invention of the True Cross* was also translated into Middle Welsh – *Val a Cauas Elen y Grog*.<sup>8</sup>

Middle Welsh, as a form of the language, dates from the 12th to the 14th centuries, the era when the *Mabinogion* manuscripts were being written, whereas Old Welsh was used in the final centuries of the first millennium AD. Before that, emerging from the common Brittonic (or Brythonic) Celtic language was what is termed Archaic Welsh. This information merely serves to illustrate how that not only were ancient stories subject to the ravages of time, and the inventive human imagination, but also the corrupting influences of linguistic evolution. Add to this ingredient mix the fact that monks invariably copied in Latin and we have a recipe for something of a dog's dinner.

To further amplify this linguistic potential for confusion along the time-line, we may briefly look at an Old English poem 'about' Saint Helen of Constantinople and the finding of the True Cross in Jerusalem. Entitled *Elene* it is attributed to a barely identifiable individual by the name of Cynewulf, who is thought to have lived some time in the closing centuries of the first millennium. Although this poem is translated from Latin, its general portrayal of Helen varies considerably from the Roman stereotype, presenting her in a distinctly militaristic framework, the poem's opening lines abounding in war-lust. She is characterised as a strong heroine, more like the famous British, 1st-century Boudica (formerly known as Boadicea), queen of the Iceni tribe, than the Helen of the Latin accounts. Incidentally, the related Welsh feminine name Buddug is derived from buddugoliaeth, meaning victory; as in the more familiar English personal names, Victor and Victoria. In the poem *Elene* from the evolving Germanic culture of the Anglo-Saxons, we find a context for Helen (i.e. 'Elene') more like that of the Elen of the Welsh stories: strong, assertive and determined to fulfil her mission. In short, we are presented with the type of heroic female quite familiar to the Celts, unlike the so-called 'weaker sex' of Rome, where a wife was traditionally defined, quite literally, as the husband's property.

The inconsistencies in the spelling of personal names, apart from that shaped by nationality, is simply a reflection of non-standardisation, orderly spelling being a relatively new phenomenon. For example, at the behest of Henry VIII a man named John Gostwyk produced an inventory of the Duke of Richmond's property, and referred to those prototype Greek lovers of ancient Troy fame, Helen and Paris. The particular list comprises descriptions of various tapestries and other wall hangings: 'Item, the firste pece of Parys and Elen, of viij. yardes di. in lengthe, and iiij. yards depe'.<sup>9</sup>

We find a similar variation in the name of Helen in the schedule of relics at Meaux Abbey, mentioned in the previous chapter. They claimed to possess 'part of the bones of St. Elene'. This abbey was in Yorkshire where church dedications to Helen (presumably Constantine's mother?) are disproportionately numerous compared to elsewhere in Britain, as observed in a 19th-century study.<sup>10</sup> The antiquary Roger Dodsworth (1585-1654) also studied churches in Yorkshire and a ruinous ancient chapel in South Yorkshire at Barnburgh is described in his work as being 'dedicated to St. Ellen'. Is it simply a spelling issue, or is there more to it? This chapel also had a holy well or spring on site, a particular feature of early Celtic Church foundations,

*Elene*

"There was to be seen treasure-gem set  
'Mid that army-host, gift of their lord.  
Then was the blessed Helena mindful,  
Bold in her thought, of the prince's will,  
Eager in mind, in that she of the Jews,  
O'er the army-fields with tested band  
Of warriors-with-shields, the land was seeking,  
With host of men; so it after befell  
In little while that that force of men,  
War-famed heroes to Jerusalem  
Came to the city the greatest of crowds,  
Spear-famed earls, with the noble queen."

Extract from James  
Garnett's translation  
of *Elene* published  
in 1889.





regarded by Christianised Rome as perpetuating pagan practices and thoroughly frowned upon. So much so, that in 1102 a council was held at Westminster under the auspices of King Henry I and Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury. Amongst the topics agreed upon, the twenty-sixth canon forbade worship at springs, fountains and the like, which was still a widespread practice among rural communities even though they were Christians.

It is now obvious that the odds of perfect continuity in the literary history of recording what was essentially folk-memory, are clearly stacked against success. We should not be surprised, therefore, if things got confused, especially with personal names. Even a word like legend has quite distinctly different meanings, depending on where one stands on the time-line. For a Roman, the Latin root word *legenda* simply meant things to be read, without a value judgement connotation, whereas to the modern reader legend implies something that may or may not be factually correct and historically accurate.

For the chroniclers of the Middle Ages, historic fact – as far as it could be deduced – never stood in the way of a good story, and with the best of intentions things got muddled. It was not confined to the medieval period, however, as evidenced by the antiquarian Bishop of Peterborough, White Kennett (1660-1728). Speaking of Helen after her discovery of the True Cross in the Holy Land, he confidently declared that, ‘*returning homewards*’ she sailed to North Wales and ‘*landed at Aber Segont, near that fair walled town which now we call Carnarvon, where Constans, her grandchild had built a city, some part of the walls thereof are yet standing*’.<sup>11</sup> The Helen of which Kennett writes is clearly conflated with Elen Luyddog, presumed to be returning to North Wales after Macsen’s death in 388. The bishop is also referring to the Roman settlement of Segontium, where 20th-century archeological evidence would suggest that the legions abandoned this fort in the 380s when Maximus withdrew his forces to Europe. Published in 1923, the archeological report interprets the findings as a link to this military exodus: ‘*A literal interpretation of the coin evidence would, therefore, place the evacuation of the site [Segontium] approximately in the period 380-385; and it would be an easy further step to associate this evacuation with the withdrawal by Maximus in 383.*’<sup>12</sup> A similar situation arose at Hadrian’s Wall, where no coins beyond the date of 383 have been found at this frontier location, suggesting that the Roman garrison had left there by then to accompany Maximus on his military expedition.

In another literary example from the 17th-century, we find the antiquary and Catholic priest, Richard Broughton endorsing the supposed nationality and pious nature of the partner of Maximus: ‘*His British wife Queene and Empress daughter of Octavius [Eudaf] is commended in histories to have bene a very vertuous Lady.*’<sup>13</sup> In his *Parochial Antiquities* published in 1695, Bishop White Kennett even refers to Elen with a curious spelling of the cognomen Luyddog: ‘*Elen lueddaw*’. This may be in allusion to Llydaw (Brittany), although we do not know the writer’s particular source. Was it, for example, folk-memory information acquired when he visited Caernarfon? It is tempting to wonder if the cognomen spelling is actually in reference to the Snowdonian area of Llyn Llydaw, rather than to a region of France, but then his use of ‘*lueddaw*’ may be nothing more than loose anglicisation of the Welsh word luyddog as it was spoken to him by a local source during his visit.

Another British antiquary of the time, John Horsley (c.1685-1732) provides an account of events in Britain in the early 400s. The following quote from Horsley’s book, *Britannia Romana*, also illustrates the potential for confusion. It surrounds the name Constantine and Horsley noted: ‘*The inhabitants and troops that were quartered in Britain [...] confer the sovereignty upon one Constantine, not so much in respect to his courage or quality, for he was a very inconsiderable man in the army, but in regard of his name, which they looked upon as fortunate; hoping he would do as much as Constantine the Great had done, who was of the same name, and had advanced to the imperial dignity in the same island [Britain]. This new prince immediately after his promotion passed over into Gaul, and taking with him the very flower of the British youth, so utterly exhausted the military force of the island, that it was wholly broken, and the island left naked to new invaders.*’<sup>14</sup>



Horsley is referring to the Constantine mentioned by Adam of Usk, Constantine III (also known as Flavius Claudius Constantinus), who was a Roman general stationed in Britannia. Like Magnus Maximus before him, he declared himself emperor of the Western Empire in 407. He too crossed the English Channel to advance his imperial ambitions in Gaul, and like Maximus he was captured and executed after just a few years. This simply serves to show how easily players with similar names have the potential to become muddled on history's stage, which was especially the case before the Italian Renaissance generated a flow of antique classical literature for – arguably – more reliable reference material.

Another source for historic information is the Welsh Triads, the study of which Rachel Bromwich (1915-2010) devoted much of her later professional life, culminating in her outstanding bi-lingual work, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein – The Triads of the Island of Britain*, first published in 1961, with an extensive revision in 2006. The numbers quoted hereafter refer to the triad numbering in this study of these ancient records. Triad 35 enumerates the three forces that left Britain, the first in chronological sequence being that of Elen of the Hosts and her brother Cynan, who subsequently became ruler of Brittany. These supporters of the cause of Maximus/Macsen are said in the triad to have numbered twenty-one thousand warriors. They are referred to in the triad as '*Silver Hosts*' because they took the gold and silver of Britannia with them, presumably to fund this massive military campaign and particularly the large fleet necessary to sail from Rutupiae to Gaul. Geoffrey of Monmouth makes mention of gold and silver flowing daily to Maximus (whom he mistakenly calls '*Maximianus*') in Britain, and if Maximus had spent time at Segontium then that could have been the treasury where it was all stored. Bromwich suggests that this may account for the otherwise inexplicable reference in Nennius to precious metals being found at Segontium, a subject which we considered on page 32 of this book. Also, the figure of Saint Cystennin appears in Triad 51 and, as previously noted this '*Custennin the Blessed*' was the son of Elen Luyddog, and he is also described as the grandfather of King Arthur. The triad tells us that the saint's son – known as '*Custennin the Younger*' – was killed by Vortigern ('*Gwrtheyrn the Meagre*'), a treacherous ruler of Britain who appears in our next chapter. It is fitting that he should be listed as one of the three '*Men of Shame*' in Triad 51.

A good pedigree was – and still is – the cornerstone of nobility's claim to rule, so having a famous ancestor was highly desirable, especially if the aspiring noble was bidding for the royal throne. The Welsh Triads are certainly rich in pedigree information, including claims of descent from Joseph of Arimathea. In a manuscript in the British Library (Harley 3859) there are appended genealogies, believed to have been compiled in the second half of the 10th-century. The one relating to the Welsh royal house of Deheubarth (Dyfed) claims descent for Owain (950-988) from '*Helen Luitdauc*' (Elen Luyddog), and goes on to say she travelled from Britain to Jerusalem, retrieved the True Cross and took it to Constantinople. Confusion all round it seems, but before dismissing it as yet another obvious example of conflation between Helen of Constantinople and Elen of Caernarfon, perhaps we should pause to reflect. Since we do not yet know for certain how and when an unusually large piece of the True Cross arrived in the kingdom of Gwynedd, perhaps the rather succinct genealogical summary is telling us a partial piece of actual folk-memory, albeit inevitably ambiguous given the time-frame.

Writing in the 12th-century about the Welsh, Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) observed: '*Even the common people retain their genealogy, and can not only readily recount the names of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers, but even refer back to the sixth or seventh generation, or beyond them*'. He also noted how the Welsh bardic tradition served to record the pedigrees of princes, written in their '*ancient and authentic books*' and, most noteworthy, traced ancestors back to the '*Blessed Virgin Mary*'.<sup>15</sup> Here we are harking back to Britain's 1st-century Christian folk-memory, the holy families featured in chapter one of this book.

These genealogical claims from Wales were to greatly excite the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Peckham towards the end of the 13th-century. He was the cleric and royal emissary during the conquest by King Edward I, and a 19th-century writer on Welsh history summarised an interesting, if disingenuous letter from Peckham: '*It recites his laborious attempts to serve the Welsh people, expatiates upon the king's good*



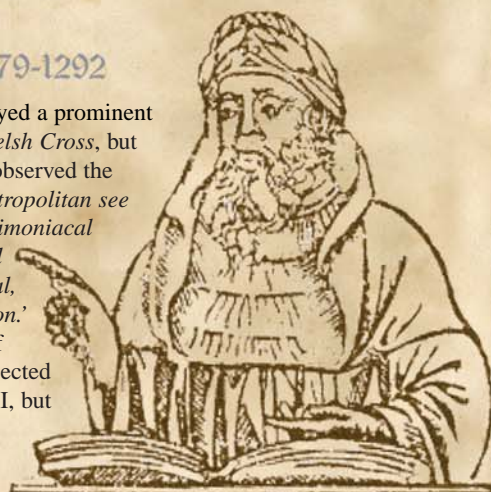
**Peckham's tomb  
at Canterbury**

## John Peckham

### Archbishop of Canterbury 1279-1292

John Peckham (c.1230-1293) is a character who played a prominent role in the story leading to England acquiring the *Welsh Cross*, but what sort of man was he? A 19th-century historian observed the following about Peckham: *'He was raised to the metropolitan see by the pope, in consequence, as it is reported, of a simoniacal contract to pay his holiness the sum of four thousand marks. It is added, that the money not being punctual, the pontiff threatened Peckham with excommunication.'* At the time Peckham bought his way into the role of Archbishop of Canterbury, the monks had already elected their candidate, who was endorsed by King Edward I, but the deal with the pope won the day.

John Britton's *Canterbury Cathedral Antiquities*, 1836.



*intentions towards them, and reproves the discreditable and fabulous boast of a genealogical descent from one who had abetted the evil doings of Helen's seducer, censures their own licentiousness (probably in reference to the marriage of priests), and declares that they being guilty of treason against both the civil and canonical laws, their hereditary rights are extinct, and nothing remains for them but royal clemency'.<sup>16</sup>*

We explore the wars between England and Wales in a later chapter, but it is worth commenting here on the curious mention of *'Helen's seducer'*. This appears to be an insult aimed at Maccsen Wledig/Magnus Maximus, rather than Constantius Chlorus, the former having 'seduced' Elen, the latter actually Helen. Again confusion over names and spellings: the archbishop was using the English version (Helen) of the Welsh name Elen, because in England the name Elen would be a diminutive form of Elena/Eleanor.

Did Peckham's outrage over claims of *'genealogical descent'* stem from the frightening thought that the royal Welsh families his king was then viciously exterminating were really descended from *the* holy family? Similar descendancy claims have been made in relation to the Frankish Merovingian dynasty, founded in Gaul in the mid-400s. This is thoroughly researched and developed in the fascinating modern studies of the historian Laurence Gardner, whose work has expanded the boundaries of our understanding of the Dark Ages and the genealogies of Europe's royal families.

It was not just individuals who were concerned about genealogies and pedigrees. In the 10th-century the cities of York and Trier nearly came to blows over which was the key player in the Constantine-Helen ownership row. Unless archaeologists make finds that shake scholarship to the core, things remain uncertain. Even if some ancient manuscript escaped its dusty archive, after languishing unknown for centuries, and revealed some staggering new information on the Constantinian saga, it is unlikely to achieve the esteemed status of 'definitive' so beloved of scholars. Being written in Latin would push it in the credibility direction, because of our romano-centric cultural legacy, but it would still remain the subject of conflicting theses and umpteen scholarly papers and books.

What might help would be something really tangible – on the ground as it were – that would be substantial enough to at least point us in the right direction to discover Elen. Just such a pilgrims' way does exist and it runs throughout Wales – Sarn Helen. Roman roads are known all over Britain, although probably most have disappeared beneath concrete and tarmac, becoming the A this or the B that. Sarn Helen, on the other hand, is evident in many rural and fairly inaccessible places in Wales, even though the legions have been replaced by farmers' tractors. As a topographical feature it tells us little, but by having the name of an empress of Rome attached – either Helen or Elen – we should wander its course to examine its relevance to our quest. Sections of this Roman road network are illustrated on pages 59, 74, 76 and 83.

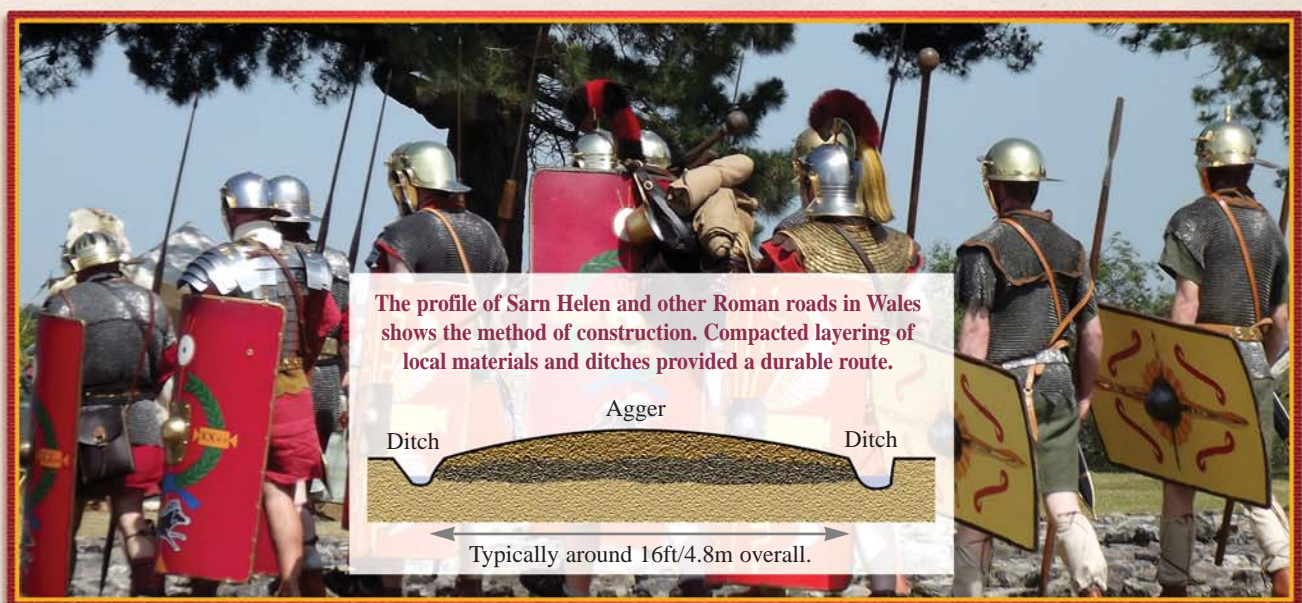
Exploring the Roman remains in Britain was a great passion for the antiquaries of recent centuries,



and as well as various monuments and artefacts, the Roman roads themselves were of particular interest. Probably one of the earliest eminent Englishmen to explore and record Sarn Helen was William Camden (1551-1623). His book, *Britannia* – written in Latin to accord with the romano-centric scholarship of his day – proved a great success, reaching seven editions by 1607. In 1590 Camden was undertaking research in Wales and observed the following about Sarn Helen: ‘*And not far from hence, near a small village called Festiniog [today’s Llan Ffestiniog in Gwynedd], is a high road or military way of pitched stones, which leads through these difficult and almost unpassable mountains; and seeing it is called in British [i.e. Welsh] Sarn Helen, or Helen’s Way, it is but reasonable that we suppose it made by Helena the mother of Constantine the Great; whose works were many and magnificent throughout the Roman Empire. This was probably of a very considerable extent; unless we should suppose the same Helen was author of several other high ways in Wales. For besides the place it is here mentioned, it is also visible at one end of Kraig Verwyn, where it is called Fordhgam Helen Luedhog*’.<sup>17</sup>

Camden mentions – ignoring his spelling – Ffordd Elen Luyddog, the Welsh word *ffordd* simply meaning a road or other byway. We should bear in mind that Camden may not have accessed the *Mabinogion* texts at that time, so Macsen’s partner Elen would not necessarily have been familiar to him, other than through what, if anything, may have been recounted from folk-memory by the Welsh people he encountered on his travels in the late 16th-century. The 18th-century Welshman, Lewis Morris, was quite scathing about Camden’s poor grasp of the Welsh language, saying ‘*he had but a very little smattering in the British [i.e. Welsh]*’. He also complains that Camden should have been better acquainted with ‘*our old manuscripts*,’<sup>18</sup> which Morris himself explores in his fascinating work *Celtic Remains* (1878).

The previously quoted churchman White Kennett described his experiences of Sarn Helen several decades after Camden died in 1623, and Kennett’s *Parochial Antiquities* (1695) contains some interesting descriptions of this Roman road. At the time he was in Caernarfon, which he calls ‘*Caer Constans*’ meaning the Fort of Constans – Segontium. The Constans referred to may have been the one who was a son of Constantine the Great and ruled from 337 to 350, defeating his brother Constantine II in the year 340. Kennett’s opening observation shows that the ancient church of Saint Helen/Elen and her holy well were still extant in his day: ‘*In the bowels of this old town Caer Constans, there is a little chapel still standing, and a delicate spring of running water fast by, both bearing St. Helen’s name, in memory of her landing there; and from the gates of this city (where is both a cross way, and also a cross of stone standing in bivio between the two ways) ariseth a great causeway of hard durable stone; for such is the nature of those stones, that they will not wear away; the way on each side being worn out knee deep*’.





Kennett's final observation about either side of the road being '*knee deep*' is more than likely to be a reference to the standard mode of road construction employed by the Romans. The central section (Latin *Agger*) was the working road surface, slightly curved and higher than the adjacent land due to compacted layering with gravel, stones and clay, and on either side of this ran ditches to facilitate drainage. These could indeed have been knee-deep, as observed by Kennett and illustrated on page 68. Obviously, Roman roads would have continued in use for many centuries and would require regular maintenance, including the clearing of the drainage ditches, which Kennett noted during his visit in the 1600s.

Another traveller, this time of the 18th-century, the Reverend J. Evans shows himself to be something of an amateur archaeologist, as he casually investigates the Roman road with a spade: '*On digging, the layers of stones with which it [Sarn Helen] were formed, are visible in the whole of its course to the breadth of eight yards. It is evidently a work of the Romans*'.<sup>19</sup> When in the Caernarfon area in 1798, Evans recorded in a letter that, '*the remains of a Roman road are still visible from this place to Dinorwig. It lays on the eastern banks of the [river] Seiont*.' Evans also mentioned in his book published in 1812 another significant location: '*On a mountain called Migneint near Rhyd ar Helen, within a quarter of a mile from this road [Sarn Helen] are some remarkable stone monuments, called Beddau Gwyr Ardudwy, i.e. the graves of the men of Ardudwy. They are at least thirty in number*'.

Reference to the place name '*Rhyd ar Helen*' (map page 74) is obviously relevant, the Welsh word *rhyd* meaning a ford, as in going over a stream or river. To illustrate how the misspelling – even by the resident of Wales, the eminent antiquary Thomas Pennant (1726-1798) – of a Welsh word can lead to confusion, Pennant's book refers to '*Rhyd yr Halen*'.<sup>20</sup> The Welsh word *halen* means salt, again emphasising how things can get muddled. This same spelling issue arises with no less an authority than the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales (RCAHMW), whose inventory of Merionethshire from the early 1900s serves to illustrate this *halen* (salt) and Helen potential for confusion. The RCAHMW inspector was searching for an old stone monument, called Y Garreg Lwyd, and he wrote: '*The above is the location of Garreglwyd farm where there is now no indication of a grey maenhir or standing stone. Mrs Williams, now about 69 years old, who was born in the house, had never heard of any such boulder; nor had her mother, who was also born there, ever made mention of such a circumstance or tradition of the same. But Mrs Williams pointed out a huge piece of natural rock [...] which she stated she had always heard spoken of in her girlhood as "Coffer Halen" [sic.], i.e. "Coffer Helen" (Helen's Coffer)*'.<sup>21</sup>

The report's very brief description of the stone itself in no way suggests the shape of a coffer. So, perhaps what the RCAHMW's inspector heard Mrs Williams say was '*coffa*' which means remembrance, the Welsh for coffer being simply spelled *coffr*. Presumably, this '*natural rock*' in the Ffestiniog area near Sarn Helen had some association with Helen/Elen, but exactly what cannot now be determined. The remembrance is most likely to have been of Elen Luyddog rather than Constantine's mother Helen, principally because of the location and her status in Welsh folk-memory.

Another example of the linguistic confusion between *halen* and Helen/Elen arises in north-east Anglesey. It centres on a site called '*Gadlas*' on sheet 77 of the early 19th-century one-inch to the mile Ordnance Survey map of Anglesey, where the relevant place is simply marked as '*Capel*' in gothic script to indicate an ancient location. This map forms the background image on page 70 opposite, with the area detail extracted and the word '*Capel*' now highlighted in red. Inexplicably, on the later six-inch to the mile map (Anglesey VII.NE) it is marked as '*Capel Halen*'. The site is in the district of Penrhoslligwy overlooking the estuary of the River Dulas. Obviously '*Halen*' is a corruption of Helen/Elen, there being no saints by the name of Salt, which is not known to have any religious connotations; except, perhaps, in the *Book of Genesis* where Lot's wife was turned into the stuff. When Richard Fenton was in this area at the beginning of the 1800s, he remarked on the place-name as '*Y Gadlys*' when considering the various royal courts (Llys) of the Welsh rulers, including the one '*at Penrhos where is to be seen at this day a piece of the palace*', going on to define '*Y Gadlys*' as meaning '*the prince's court of guard*'.



# Capel Elen Anglesey





The 20th-century historian E. Neil Baynes undertook considerable research into the very limited documentary references to this ancient chapel and concluded that the place-name referred to Elen.<sup>22</sup> Baynes found that an estate map of 1773 simply refers to the location as '*Old Chapel*'. Much earlier still, the ecclesiastical taxation assessment required by Pope Nicholas IV of 1291-92 records a '*Llanelen*' in Anglesey. The collection of medieval manuscripts known as the *Record of Caernarfon* includes the *Extent of Edward III* (1335), which also mentions a '*Lan Elen*'. Little is known of the chapel itself, except for a strange account recorded by Samuel Lewis (c.1782-1865) in his *Topographical Dictionary of Wales* (1833 edition), where he describes the remaining architecture as being of '*the very rudest kind, [which] bears testimony to its great antiquity*'. Lewis recounts how that during the hunt a fox had taken cover among the ruins and its pursuers discovered a vault '*containing several human skeletons*', which turned to dust on exposure to the air, thus showing the remains to have been very ancient indeed. On further investigation it was found that the interior floor of the chapel itself had only a covering of plaster, beneath which '*a large mass of human bones, several feet in depth*' were discovered.

It would appear from this brief account that the chapel's floor may have covered an ancient mass grave, the background to which is currently unknown. It is, perhaps, worth considering if it stemmed from some local military action involving Elen Luyddog and the forces associated with her and Magnus Maximus. As a commemoration of this now otherwise unknown event, the chapel may have acquired its saintly toponym, and although there is no evidence for this suggestion it seems more plausible than the absurd association with salt.

As may be expected given its antiquity, there are no visual or literary records of Elen's Chapel itself, and today the site is filled with chalets on a holiday park called Capel Elen, part of the Tyddyn Isaf farm estate. Other old Anglesey maps may tell us more, but these can be fraught with inconsistencies. The 1795 map by the Anglesey-born John Evans is shown on page 70, with the site of Elen's Chapel (the so-called '*Capel Halen*') having now been added in red to show its general location. By the time Evans came to survey and produce his remarkably accurate map of Anglesey the chapel had ceased to exist.

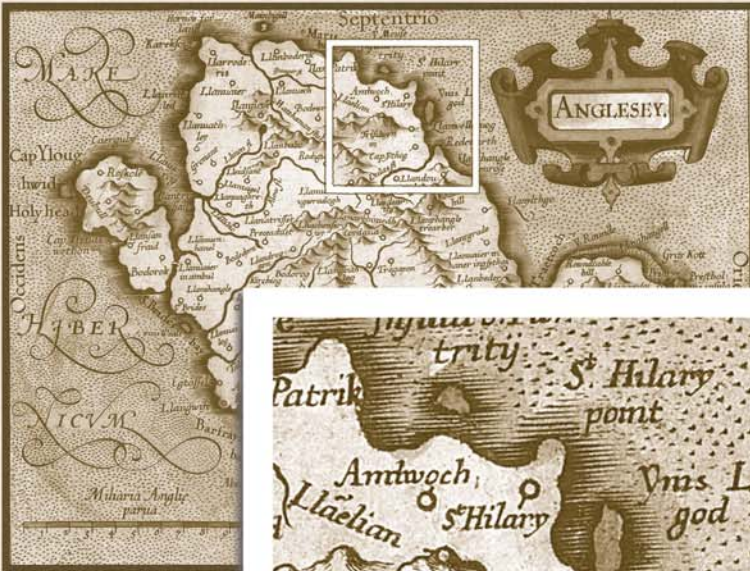
Where the topographic confusion gets even more complicated is when we come to examine other maps of this north-eastern area of Anglesey, when not only actual locations get confused but also the names of the saints being celebrated at particular churches and chapels. If we examine a couple of map details (opposite on page 72) we can readily appreciate how the similarities of these saintly names gave rise to a conflation pattern now familiar to us through that of Helen, Elen and an assortment of Constantines.

In these graphic records of history we examine first that of the famous Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator, where we find no trace of Elen's Chapel in his Anglesey map of 1595. Examining a documentary source like Henry VIII's *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (Church Valuation) of 1535, we again discover that there is no mention of this Elen's Chapel either. This would suggest that Capel Elen was already long-abandoned by the beginning of the 16th-century.

What we do find on the Mercator map is a chapel dedicated to '*Saint Hilary*', the 4th-century Bishop of Poitiers in what was then the Roman province of Gaul. However, when we look at an 18th-century map by George Rollos (1769) of the same location, Saint Hilary's has been miraculously turned into '*Saint Helens*' chapel, here confused with Capel Elen, which was actually some three miles further south, as illustrated on page 70. This was not a result of a chapel relocation, or even a rededication of patron saints, but rather an inept grasp of the original dedication to a Saint Elian (or Eilian) on the more northerly site. Here the conflation between Helen and Elen has been compounded further by not only Hilary but also Elian, who was active in that area of Anglesey in the early 500s. Elian was under the patronage of Cadwallon Lawhir ap Einion, a king of Gwynedd in that era. Fenton records that this ruler had '*a residence near this church*







The 1595 Anglesey map by Mercator showing the site of a chapel dedicated to the 4th-century Saint Hilary.



[Llanelian] called to this day [c.1800] Llys Caswallon. The remains still to be seen. The church built probably in consequence of his residing here. He endowed the church with much lands'.

Samuel Lewis describes Saint Eilian as 'bishop of Lindisfarne' and that he 'was celebrated for the sanctity of his life; and the high veneration in which his memory was held drew multitudes from the remotest parts of Britain to this place, in which he had lived, in order to obtain, by their pilgrimage and votive offerings, the highly appreciated benefit of his favour and protection. The offerings of the pilgrims upon these occasions amounted annually to a large sum'. Lewis also mentions the saint's well, 'nearly dried up and the chapel in ruins', although 'many persons still annually resort to this place', that being in the early 1800s when Lewis was compiling his outstanding two-volume topographic study.

With the 1795 map (page 70) by John Evans the topographic confusion is sorted out and the chapel is correctly designated as Llanelian, marked with a green dot on his map. The site of Elen's Chapel (so-called 'Capel Halen') further south has been added to Evans' map in red to show its currently known location in this ancient Christian landscape of Anglesey, which so evidently challenged these early cartographers.

As to the modern OS maps of the area where Mercator identified a headland called 'St Hilary point', this is now simply called 'Point Lynas', so Hilary has faded from memory, although Rollos gives both toponyms on his map. This fusion of names stems from the Celtic Saint Eilian being given the Latin name of Aelianus, and from around 1500 it was thought to refer to Hilary, producing cartographic confusion.



The 1769 map by Rollos transforms the dedication to Saint Helen. Elen's Chapel is actually a few miles south.



The bay adjacent to this headland is now called 'Porth Eilian' (Eilian's Port), but in 1297 it was recorded as 'la baye sancte Elene', meaning Elen's Bay and hence the appearance of 'St Helens' in the Rollos map of 1769. While Rollos would certainly have been well aware of Emperor Constantine's saintly mother, he is unlikely to have heard of Saint Elen of Caernarfon, and so the conflation rolled on through the maps of time.



Leaving Anglesey and returning to the Reverend Evans' mention above of 'the graves of the men of Ardudwy', we arrive back in the *Mabinogion*, where the story of *Math Son of Mathonwy* tells of love for an enchantingly beautiful woman, leading eventually to a major battle between the warriors of Gwynedd and Ardudwy. One of the grave stones is now in the church at Penmachno and is pictured on the right. In the story of *Math Son of Mathonwy* we find the earliest reference to Helen's Wood, or more specifically Coed Alun as it was known in the Middle Ages. The battle between Math's army and that of his enemy Pryderi took place near that Caernarfon location. There is also a reference in the story to 'Mur Castell', which turns out to be the 1st-century Roman fort – and later a Norman motte and bailey castle – now known as Tomen y Mur, located near the village of Trawsfynydd in Gwynedd. In Thomas Richards' *A British or Welsh-English Dictionary* (1815), 'Tommen' (sic.) is defined as referring to a hillock, which aptly describes it, the mur element of the Welsh place-name indicating that it was walled or fortified. The medieval text *History of Gruffydd ap Cynan* records that its fortifications were utilised by both King William II (c.1056-1100) and Henry I who reigned after William. The text mentions these kings and their troops camping at 'Mur Castell' during the Norman's early military efforts to dominate the Welsh.

In the 18th-century Tomen y Mur was misidentified as a place referred to as 'Heriri Mons', stemming from an event that swept through the Age of Antiquaries like a computer virus spreading corrupt data on Roman Britain. The son of an English silk dyer, Charles Bertram (1723-1765) had claimed to have found a previously unknown work attributed to a medieval monk. For the next hundred years it was extensively quoted as fact by historians studying Roman Britain, before being finally identified as a fake document, much to the dismay of scholars far and wide.

That intrepid explorer of the ancient landscapes of Wales, Richard Fenton mistakenly referred to Tomen y Mur as a tumulus (an early form of burial mound), noting Sarn Helen at the outset of his description: 'Certainly saw a bit of it where it issued from the [Roman] station exactly in the line it must have taken to have gone to Segontium. Examined the tumulus which had been dug into for stone [...] but the people having found enough stone for their purposes have deserted it'. Again referring to Sarn Helen, he goes on to note how it, 'formerly went by the three trees planted in a row in the parson's lawn, and up under the churchyard'.<sup>23</sup>

Fortunately, enough of Sarn Helen survived the locals' quarrying activities and the proddings of antiquaries to provide us with a fairly clear record of its location, although several stretches of its lengthy route are still uncertain. One antiquary, William Cathrall was proposing in 1828 that more research was needed, suggesting that, 'a kind of corresponding society' be formed amongst the antiquarian community to consider the Roman roads of Wales, 'before the visible remains of them have been dug up and destroyed.'<sup>24</sup> Sarn Helen's position in remote rural locations has certainly helped its survival. By roughly 150 AD we may reasonably assume that the Roman conquerors of Britain had at least achieved a fairly sound infrastructure in terms of the road network, linking their forts and settlements to support the needs of the garrisons and their families.



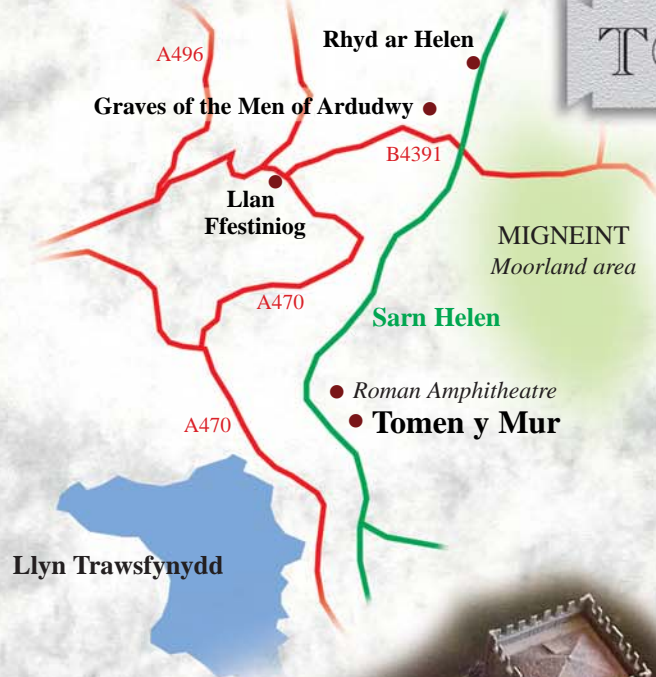
This grave marker dates to the 5th/6th-century and it commemorates Cantiori, a cousin of the magistrate Maglus, who was a citizen of Venedotia, the Roman name for Gwynedd.



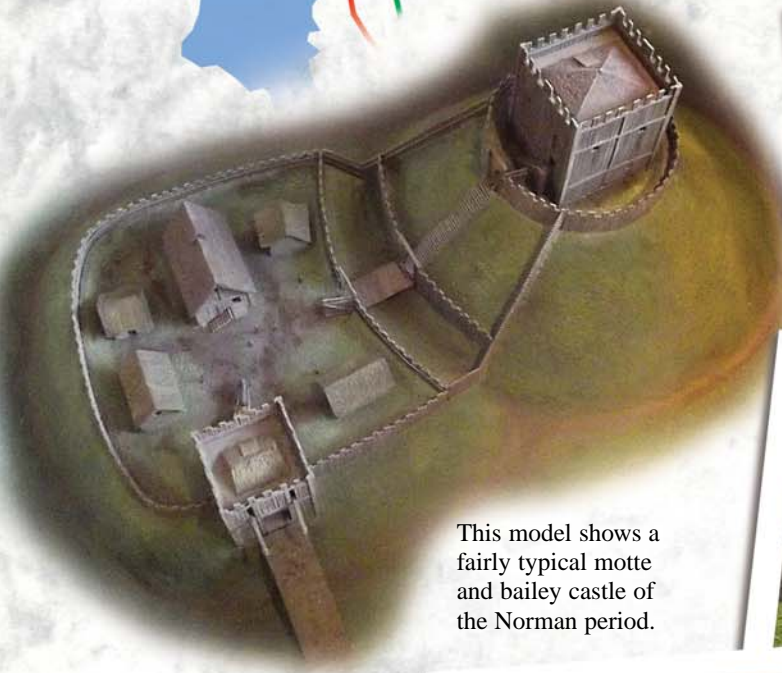
The 'paved' surface of Sarn Helen as it appears today in the stretch running from the village of Croesor towards Beddgelert.



## TOMEN Y MUR



Tomen y Mur (Mound in the Walls) was a Roman fort constructed around the year 78AD, during the governorship of the recently established province of Britannia by Gnaeus Julius Agricola. His son-in-law was Tacitus who wrote a romano-centric version of events (see also page 21). Like others in Gwynedd (Latin *Venedotia*), it was built to control the Celtic tribe known by the Romans as the Ordovices, who put up a stiff resistance to the foreign enemy. Sarn Helen (green line) runs passed the fort, which was eventually abandoned around 140AD. Its Roman name is not recorded.



This model shows a fairly typical motte and bailey castle of the Norman period.



LEFT Photographs show the modern reconstruction of fortifications on the site for the benefit of visitors.



However, we should not assume – romano-centrally – that they were building on virgin soil. Afterall, the ancient Britons obviously travelled and traded too, and they would have needed a reliable infrastructure of their own making, despite what antiquarian lovers of Latin would have us believe: *‘They [the Britons’ routes] were, probably, never made with care; though I suspect that the Britons must have copied their masters in civilisation, the Romans.’*<sup>25</sup>

The 1921 Merioneth report of the RCAHMS makes the significant statement that Sarn Helen ‘*was in existence before and during the period of the Roman occupation*’, while their report for Central Caernarvonshire states that ‘*much of the substantial road building in Britain may not have taken place until the time of Hadrian*’, who was emperor from 117 to 138AD. If, as we are told here, the route existed ‘*before*’ the Roman invasion of the 1st-century AD, then it would obviously have acquired the name Sarn Helen some time after the late 300s, but there is no way of knowing precisely when that was. One of the earliest references is in a poem by Guto’r Glyn from 1468, praising the military activities of his patron, Sir William Herbert during the Wars of the Roses. The poet said that the troops marched along ‘*Sarn Elen*’, so the name was certainly well established by that time, including the correct Welsh eponym.

In many instances the Roman civil engineering may not have been much more than substantial resurfacing of the Celtic tracks and byways that must have already been in place. So that brings us to wonder why the 4th-century Elen, daughter of Eudaf featured in the *Mabinogion* tale would be commissioning roads. There is no satisfactory explanation offered in the story, and even if there was, would it contribute anything of merit to what it is essentially a magical love story in *The Dream of Macsen Wledig*?

It is the localised naming aspect of Sarn Helen’s route that is worth exploring in some detail, although place-names can be deceptive, especially when it comes to dating the naming period. Again we are up against the vagaries of time and human intervention. Consider, for example, the name of the River Avon in England, the Avon word reflecting the old Celtic – and modern Welsh (afon) – word meaning river; the single F has a V sound in Welsh. There are several rivers in Britain named Avon and when fully anglicised their names would read ‘river river.’ Such is the challenging nature of place-names.

Local legends can be particularly informative, as they are invariably an expression of time honoured folk-memory. This occurs, for example, in a small Gwynedd village called Croesor, where the legend tells us that Elen Luyddog was marching along Sarn Helen with her soldiers and stopped for a drink at a nearby spring, known to this day as Ffynnon Elen – Elen’s Well. While doing so she receives a message that her son has been killed and she cries out, ‘*Croes awr i mi!*’. This has been translated as meaning ‘*a bitter hour to me!*’.<sup>26</sup> Another of the many travel books on North Wales, which poured from the presses in the 19th-century, presents Elen’s exclamation as: “*Croes awe imi!*” “*Oh adverse hour for me!*” – *whoever inquires the name of the spot in which the sad news reached the bereaved Helena [Elen], will be told that that part of the valley is to this day called “Croes Awr.”*[i.e. Croesor]’<sup>27</sup> Elen’s specific use of the word ‘*Croes*’ meaning cross may have been expressed as a metaphor, likening her pain on the death of her son to that of the so-called passion of Jesus, thereby identifying with the anguish of his mother at the crucifixion.

This example of folk-memory and Elen Luyddog is from Gwynedd, and in neighbouring Powys a similar instance is to be found. It concerns the village of Llanfyllin, which lies near the border between the English town of Shrewsbury and the Welsh town of Bala. A 19th-century writer refers to the nearby valley called ‘*Cwm Glan Elen*’, and he records that it acquired this name because Elen was ‘*passing one time with her legions along the Roman road [Sarn Helen], which is in the neighbourhood.*’<sup>28</sup> This is just one of several examples of the inclusion of the personal name of Elen (or the erroneous Helen and Helena) in place-names in Wales, the highest concentration being in Gwynedd from where she evidently originated.

Today the hamlet of Croesor itself consists of a few scattered dwellings with a school and chapel, the majority of the buildings having been built in the 19th-century to accommodate workers in the surrounding quarries. Long prior to this development Croesor consisted of a handful of round houses (illustrated opposite on page 76) of the Iron Age (c.BC800 to c.AD47), or from the later Romano-British period (c.48 to c.409),



# Croesor and Elen

## Castell

Only the place-names in the Croesor landscape hint at some long-forgotten conflict, involving a castle (*Castell*) and the pass (*Bwlch*) of the battle.

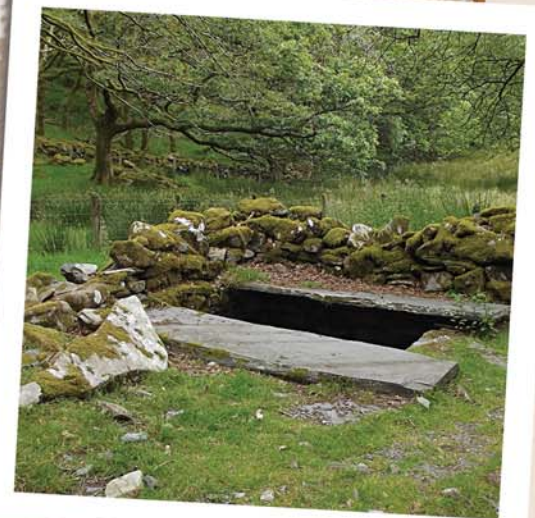
## Bwlch y Battel

The folk-memories associating this area with Elen Luyddog suggest that these place-names are records of her exploits here in the 4th-century, but no details have survived to tell us more,

## Cwm Croesor

## Ffynnon Helen

Sarn Helen winds its way through the landscape around the village of Croesor, passing Fynnon Helen, or Elen's Well, which for centuries drew pilgrims seeking cures for their ills. A large rock close by carries the initials ('ER') of an 18th-century visitor.



Ffynnon Helen/Elen's Well.





with Sarn Helen passing through the neighbourhood. The later time-frame could place these ancient dwellings into Elen's era of the 4th-century. The adjacent valley name of Cwm Croesor is said by one modern writer on Snowdonia's place-names to relate to 'a border or boundary', marked by cross-shaped posts, or 'alternatively' the author admits, it simply is a 'word-ending to indicate the frequency of people crossing the pass'.<sup>29</sup>

The Welsh word cwm (pronounced koom) describes a particular type of valley (French *cirque*), amphitheatre-shaped and with steep sides, whereas the word for a pass is bwlch and this is not included in the place-name. In any case, a wooden post is unlikely to survive very long in this damp climate, hence the prevalence of cairns and stone walls throughout Snowdonia to define boundaries and the like. Given the local folk-memory link with Elen in the place-name, we might reasonably infer a stronger connection with her than some modern writer's are comfortable with in their topographic derivations.

The antiquary with a passion for recording tales from Welsh folk-memory, Edward Llwyd was exploring Snowdonia in the 1680s when he also encountered Sarn Helen. In his study *The Legends of Wales* he noted in 1693 a place called 'Bwlch y Battel', meaning Pass of the Battle – identified in the map on page 76. Curiously, this place-name near Croesor combines both Welsh and English words, the Welsh word for battle being brwydr, and this linguistic combination in a toponym defies explanation. Llwyd states in his work that Elen Luyddog fought a battle in this pass, but he confesses to not knowing with whom she and her hosts fought, nor what the outcome was of this particular conflict. Edward Llwyd was certainly aware of the *Mabinogion* story of Elen and Macsen, since the old manuscript is listed in his *Archaeologia Britannica* (1707), a work which demonstrates his remarkable knowledge of the Celtic languages.

As portals to 'The Otherworld' a landscape's water features were of profound spiritual significance to Celtic people, with lakes in particular dominating their religion and ritual. There is a lake in Snowdonia that links to the folk-memory of Elen at Croesor, where she learned of the family tragedy. On the road running south west from Segontium/Caernarfon towards Snowdon itself, there is Llyn Cwellyn, just a few miles from Snowdon with all its Arthurian associations. A local Welsh historian recorded the following at the beginning of the 19th-century: 'Another tradition respecting the above pool [Llyn Cwellyn] is that it was called Llyn Cadair Ochan, the lake near the Seat of Lamentation, because, that at this place, Helen's soldiers lamented the death of their young leader (Helen's son) who was slain by Cidwm the giant, near Castell Cidwm, and buried at a place now called Bedd y Mab, the Grave of Helen's Son near Llyn Cwellyn'.<sup>30</sup>

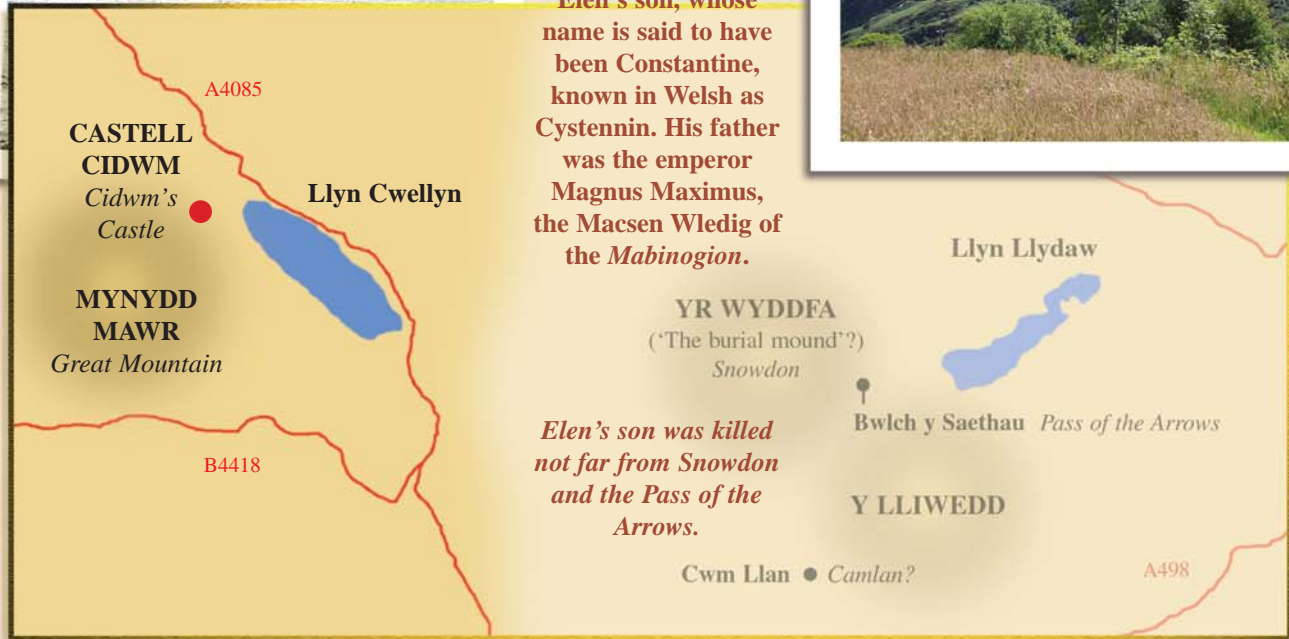
Folk-memory records that her son was shot by an arrow near Mynydd Mawr (Great/High Mountain), which overlooks Llyn Cwellyn, and his name is said to have been Constantine/Cystennin. As it was Elen Luyddog's son who was buried at Bedd y Mab, was he also caught up in the battles that raged on into Arthur's era several decades later? In his 19th-century travel book, *Wild Wales*, George Borrow says, 'cidwm in the old Welsh is frequently applied to a ferocious man', so we are not necessarily dealing with a very tall individual, a giant, as is popularly believed. The reference is not to physical stature but rather great prowess at the head of an all-conquering force. The hosts referred to in the cognomen of this particular mother, Elen, were fighting against the ultimately *giant* odds posed by the foreign invaders around the time the Romans finally abandoned Britannia at the end of the 300s.

The 18th-century Lewis Morris stressed in his work *Celtic Remains* how these frequent literary references to 'giants' are attributable to mistranslation in early medieval times, when 'there is mention of the [Welsh] word cawr; was by Galfrid [Geoffrey of Monmouth] into Latin translated (gigas) a giant, whereas the meaning of the word among ancient Britons was a prince or a man of great power; and by being ridiculously worded hath given them the air of fable.' Evidently, Cidwm was not a remarkably tall person and nor, it seems, were others who appear in the traditional tales of Wales under the descriptive word cawr in these stories. This interpretation is endorsed by William Williams in his book of *Observations* on Snowdonia, published in 1802: 'This title of Cawr was very frequently bestowed by the ancient Britons on their kings and heroes'. Unfortunately, Geoffrey's mistranslation is still perpetuated in today's books and theses covering early Welsh history, missing the point entirely for want of more thorough research.





Llyn Cwellyn is overlooked by the massive mountain called Mynydd Mawr (left), at the foot of which stands the prominence known as Castell Cidwm (right). It was from here that an arrow was fired that killed Elen's son, whose name is said to have been Constantine, known in Welsh as Cystennin. His father was the emperor Magnus Maximus, the Maccen Wledig of the *Mabinogion*.



Continuing our search for Sarn Helen and the eponymous Elen, we travel now towards the Conwy Valley, where we arrive at a village called Dolwyddelan. It is claimed that an early Celtic saint by the name of Gwyddelan had his llan or dwelling place in a dol, which is generally used in Welsh for the word meadow, although a more archaic meaning is valley or vale. That is what the parish leaflet tells us about the saintly origin of the village's name. The leaflet goes on to speculate that Saint Gwyddelan arrived from Ireland in the 6th or 7th-century, but the hand-bell on display in the church that is claimed to have belonged to him is dated to the 9th-century, so there is a glaring anachronism within this information. In the 1882 edition of the charmingly entitled guide-book, *Gossiping Guide to Wales* we are presented with the following: 'The frequent occurrences of the name Helen along this line of road [Sarn Helen] suggests a question as to the true derivation of the name of this parish, whether it should be 'Dolydd Helen' (i.e. the meadow lands of Helen), in allusion to the level meads which the line of the road here traverses'.

Although we are told the local saint was Gwyddelan from Christian folk-memory, there is not much to be said about this individual, the name being explained as 'Little Irishman' according to the *Welsh Classical Dictionary*. This was not, of course, his birth-name, simply a kind of nickname, so we do not know his true identity, assuming he even existed. It is a curious coincidence – and no more perhaps – that Saint Neot of Cornwall, as discussed in this book's Introduction, was also notably short of stature. Another, similarly named location, this time in mid-Wales, is Llanwyddelan, about which the Welsh historian, Richard Llywyd (1752-1835) had this to say: 'The church is dedicated to Gwyddelan, a saint of whom little is known. The Roman road from Chester to Caersws is supposed to have gone through the western extremity of this parish'.<sup>31</sup> Nowadays the church at Llanwyddelan near Newtown in Powys continues to be associated with this mysterious Saint Gwyddelan, whereas the antiquary Brown Willis said that the church was actually dedicated to a Saint





A plaque on a cottage wall commemorates Hugh Davies, a 19th-century local bard and blind harpist, known as the 'Lark of Elen'. As well as the village hotel, many properties in Dolwyddelan include the name of Elen, testifying to the persistent presence of folk-memory.

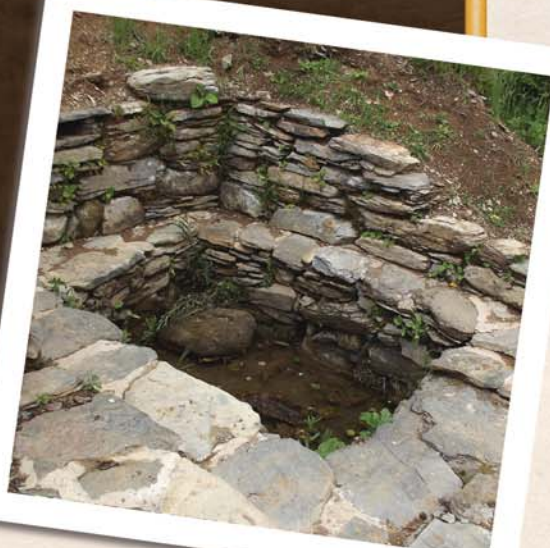


## The Village of Dolwyddelan



Dating from the early 1500s, Dolwyddelan's parish church is dedicated to a Saint Gwyddelan about whom little is known.

Saint Elen's Well behind the village hotel has been restored by the community in recent years .



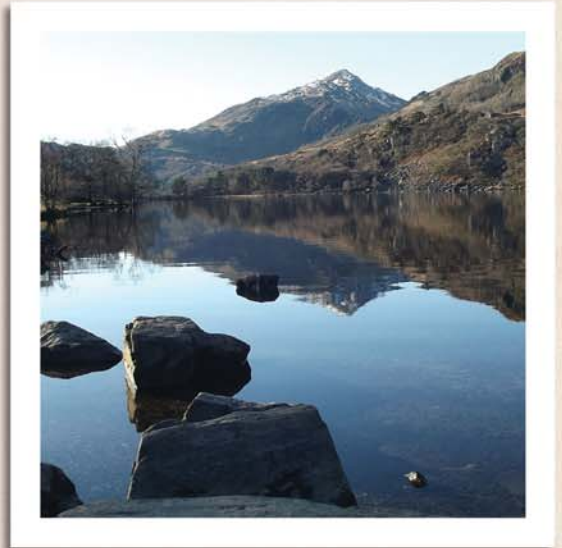


Gwendolin. Earlier still we find this place called ‘*Llanoedelan*’ in the Norwich Taxation of 1254 and ‘*Llanwydean*’ in the Taxation of 1291-92. The Powys village of Caersws also appears in the writings of the antiquary Sir Richard Colt Hoare (1758-1836), who was also exploring Sarn Helen’s route: ‘*The course of the Roman road to the next station, Caersws, is, I believe, unknown; but the name of Maes ar Helen, or the Field of Helen, may serve as a guide to the discovery of it, as it lies exactly in the direction which the road would probably have taken.*’<sup>32</sup>

Richard Fenton was with Hoare on that exploration of Sarn Helen in the early 1800s, and he recorded how they ‘*set off for Rhyd Helen to endeavour to make out the probable road that was carried on on the other side, to unite with the [Roman] stations of Caer Sws [sic.] and Pennal*’. These intrepid companions were on horseback and Fenton noted that, ‘*after winding through the trackway distinguished by the name of Llwybr Helen for a few miles, here and there jumping through portions of very infirm ground [we] came to the brow of the ascent from Pont Abergeirw, also called Pont Helen [Elen’s Bridge], where, as cultivated lands took place, all track was lost.*’

When visiting Snowdonia in 1688, Edward Llwyd came to the village of Dolwyddelan and he refers to it as ‘*Dolydd Elen*’, clearly pre-dating the 19th-century historian’s concerns about ‘Helenomania’ in general and this village’s name in particular. In his paper of 1693 Llwyd also identifies various routes for Sarn Helen and noted that, ‘*her causeway is still seen*’ along the banks of Llyn Dinas (pictured below), the lake at the foot of the fort of Dinas Emrys. Llwyd also expressed his views on Elen’s cognomen. He explains that ‘*Lhyedhog*’ (i.e. Luyddog) is an adjective meaning ‘warlike’, although in modern Welsh the more appropriate word would nowadays be *rhyfelgar*. This simply reinforces the point that Elen was a warrior princess, although in later life her saintly nature seems to have come to the fore. Seemingly, Dark Age Britain offered little scope for loving one’s enemies, let alone turning the other cheek in the face of the invaders.

The origin of the name of Dolwyddelan turned into a lively controversy in the pages of a 19th-century, popular antiquarian periodical called *Bye-gones Relating to Wales and the Border Counties*. A correspondent calling himself ‘*Ellis o’b Nant*’ had his letter published in the pages of the March 1878 issue. He explained to readers that he and his ancestors always knew the village as ‘*Dol-Gwydd-Elen, as the whole neighbourhood was covered then with dense forest. A road was constructed through the parish, which is called by the inhabitants, “Ffordd Elen”.*’ This debate relating to Dolwyddelan and similarly-named places had taken place in an earlier 19th-century antiquarian journal, *The Cambro-Briton* (1821). There the writer was tackling the question over whether or not there was actually a reference to the Irish at all in these words, and he said that, ‘*the terms “Gwyddel” and “Gwyddeli” are still used for a copse of wood, and thickets. And our bard Dafydd ap Gwilym [14th-century] is a satisfactory evidence to the point, when he describes himself, in one of his adventures, to be “is y cel’ wyddeli” – beneath the concealing thickets.*’<sup>33</sup>



The confusing link with the Irish was also explored by Lewis Morris in his work *Celtic Remains*, where he explained how ‘*Ireland was originally called by the Britons “Gwydd Ynys”, the Woody Island.*’ Morris goes on to say that the Britons/Welsh called the Irish ‘*Gwyddyl or Gwyddelod, Wood Men, though they named the island Y Werddon, i.e. Y Werdd Ynys, the Green Island, which is the British name of it to this day.*’ In English Ireland is frequently called ‘The Emerald Isle’. Finally, Morris concludes that Llanwyddelan in Powys derived its name from combining Gwydd and Elen, the saint’s personal name, and on this basis we may reasonably conclude that the same applies to the village name of Dolwyddelan, where *dol* is added to



indicate meadows, or more particularly a vale, rather than Llan as used in the place-name in Powys.

How the obscure link with Elen Luyddog may have arisen could be that it originated with the story of Macsen's dream in the *Mabinogion*, where it says that Macsen arrived at the court of Elen's father to find Eudaf carving wooden pieces for his board game, known in Welsh as Gwyddbwyll. This ancient Celtic game is thought to have been similar to chess, but the important point is the game's name, a compound translating to 'wood sense'. So, could this be the source of the confusion? This suggestion is no more than that, but it is indicative of a revealing coincidence that we find Elen in the context of woodland, rather than something to do with the Irish. They were simply an invading enemy in the 4th-century era of Elen and Macsen, who, as a young army officer under Theodosius the Elder was fighting these invaders of Britannia in the late 360s.

Other claimed associations between North Wales and the Irish can be found in what are known in Welsh as Cytiau'r Gwyddelod, which Reverend Williams' guidebook from 1821 describes as the masonry remains of circular dwellings of the '*Woodmen or Irishmen's Huts, being the foundations of rounded stones*'. Much uncertainty surrounds the archaeological dating of these hut circles, of which some fifty exist in a group at the south-western end of Holyhead Mountain on Anglesey. Evidence has been found of occupation from the late Neolithic, or early Bronze Age, and Roman coins were also found in one of the huts, which may well have still been in use during the Iron Age and into the Romano-British period. The crucial point here is how 'gwydd' is again being used in association with woodland, without necessarily implying links to the Irish and their '*Woody Island*'.

A similar conclusion may be drawn from the account of a ten-day tour of Anglesey in 1802, when a Somerset-based clergyman by the name of John Skinner joined with companions in a search for historic remains. This account was published by the *Cambrian Archaeological Association* in 1908, and Skinner says that their Welsh '*intelligent companion*' explained that Cytiau'r Gwyddelod was '*not Irishmen's huts as some have translated it but the houses of the wild inhabitants*'. Richard Fenton put it in rather more grandiose terms when he dismissed the suggestion that gwyddelod referred to the Irish, '*but to men in a state of Nature, before they knew anything of the Arts of civilized life*'. As a learned Welshman Fenton may be relied upon for accuracy in interpreting the language, as can the Anglesey-born Richard Llwyd (1752-1835), who commented on Cytiau'r Gwyddelod in his *Topographical Notices*, published in Powell's translation of *The History of Wales*. Llwyd makes no mention of the Irish when referring to these '*foundations and ruins of the rude dwellings or habitations of wood-rangers*', adding as his translation of the place-name Gwyddelwern '*the Alder Grove*'.

In the case of Dolwyddelan the question is most emphatically resolved by a statement by Sir John Wynn (1553-1627) in his manuscript account of *The History of the Gwydir Family*, which was eventually published in book form in 1770. The local Wynn family enjoyed high status among the land-owning Welsh gentry, and in this record we find Sir John enquiring as to what prompted his relative to demolish the old church in Dolwyddelan and build a new one around 1500: '*Questioning my uncle, what should move him to demolish the old church, which stood in a thicket, and build it in a plaine, stronger and greater than it was before; his answer was, he had a reason for the same, because the countrey was wild, and he might be oppressed by his enemies on the suddaine, in that woodie countrey.*'<sup>34</sup>

Here the choice of the word '*thicket*' resonates with the 14th-century bard and his mention of '*concealing thickets*', showing that it is increasingly unlikely that the name of this village has anything to do with a 'Little Irishman', about whom nothing of merit seems to be known. Also, it is not inconceivable that the demolished church was simply referred to locally along the lines of 'the church in the thicket', with an early dedication, or at least some local connection to Saint Elen. We might also recall from page 63 how William Williams, in his observations on the name of Snowdon, pointed out that gwydd can also mean '*presence*', suggesting in this context another local verbal linkage to Elen. Thus we arrive at the compound Gwydd+Elen, with the prefix Dol to indicate the local vale of meadows (Welsh plural *dolydd*) – thereby evolving through the corrupting influences of many centuries into *Dol+wydd+elan*. Additionally, there is the



Wynn's local estate name of Gwydir, which is thought – curiously enough – to be derived from the Welsh word for glass: gwydr or occasionally written as gwydyr. Dolwyddelan's village pub is called Y Gwydyr, so it looks like connections with Irishmen and window panes is all rather spurious.

In 1884 a book was published in Welsh that was the work of a poet and local historian by the name of Owen Gethin Jones (1816-1883), a man with an intimate knowledge of Dolwyddelan and the surrounding area where he lived all his life. His passion for history enabled him to access now lost folk-memory of his era. In his book he exclusively calls the village '*Dolyddelen*' and he stresses that the present parish church was only '*devoted to Saint Gwyddelan in the Protestant Revival*'.<sup>35</sup> The present church was probably built around 1500, following the demolition of the earlier one in the nearby location known as Bryn y Bedd, which means Hill of the Grave. Whose grave it may have been is not recorded and nor is the dedication of the older church, assuming it was dedicated to a saint. Jones is emphatic in interpreting the name of the village as meaning '*Elen's Meadows*', and crucially he says the link with a supposed Saint Gwyddelan arose only when the new church was built and dedicated.

Evidently, connections with this Saint Gwyddelan arose in the post-1500s simply to avoid any controversial associations with the Catholic Saint Helen (Constantine's mother), who was definitely ousted from Britain's Reformation list of worthies, being far too 'popish' for comfort in those turbulent times of religious conflict with all things 'Romish'. Even at that time the conflation between Helen and Elen was a force to be reckoned with. Since the nearby Roman road was called Sarn Helen, it was obviously feared that the Catholic Saint was implied, rather than the less well-known Celtic saint of Caernarfon, Elen Luyddog. Sir John Wynn was a devout Roman Catholic and had made two pilgrimages to Rome. He would have been wise not to have broadcast the fact at the time. So, a seemingly innocuous dedication to some obscure, even imaginary Irish saint would have been a shrewd move, even though the local community would have been well aware of all the historic associations with Saint Elen in and around their village. Richard Fenton even made the point that, '*the name of such a saint [as Gwyddelan] is not found amongst our copious catalogue of saints*', so all of the foregoing evidence makes the church dedication to a 'Little Irishman' too incredible to be even plausible.

Across the river from Dolwyddelan's church stands a property called Tyddyn Elan, marked on the map on page 83. The Welsh word tyddyn denotes a small farm or homestead, but the word elan is more complex. It is generally used as a female name and is thought to mean the 'bright or shining one', the implication again being that, like the names Elen and Helen it derives ultimately from the sun-god Helios. As a place-name it also appears in the Elan Valley in Powys. This property in Dolwyddelan lies on a sharp bend in the river and the name could, therefore, be a corruption of the Welsh word elin which means elbow. This could connect with the place-name element dol because of its origin in the early Celtic language (*dola* and its Indo-European prototype, *dholo*) as meaning an area of water meadow almost enclosed by a loop or bend (hence elbow) in a river's course, and the property in the village certainly fits that type of descriptive location.

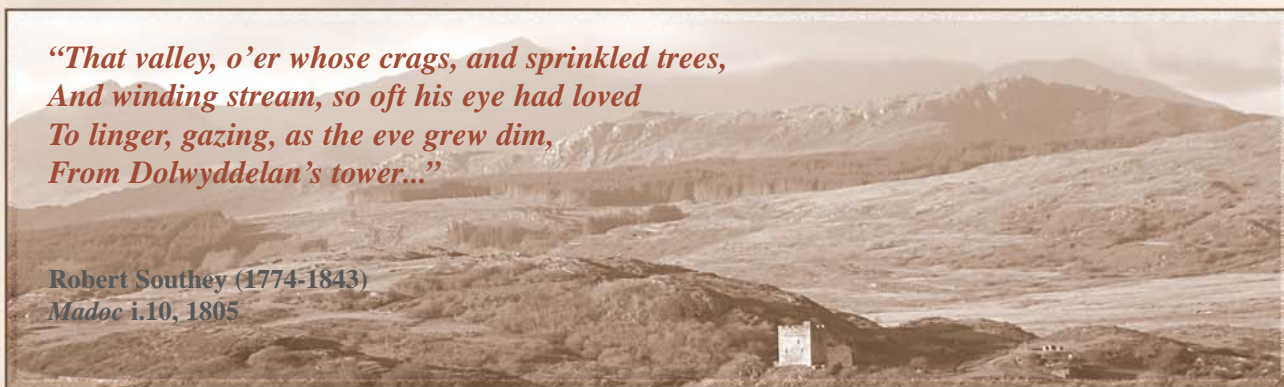
Etymology can at times be highly speculative, perhaps none more so than in grasping the origin and meaning of some words in the Welsh language, and Sir John Rhys (1840-1915) spent much of his career in this area of study, becoming Oxford University's first Professor of Celtic in 1877. He also considered the elusive Elen Luyddog and, while he got rather carried away in describing her as literally a '*vagrant goddess of dawn and dusk*', his 1886 lecture *On the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom* (published in 1888) makes an interesting point about the use of Elan and the like: '*In Arvon the mythic name Elen becomes, according to rule, Elan; while the ordinary name Ellen, much used in Wales, is pronounced in Arvon Elin, whenever Elinor, of which it is a shortened form, is not preferred*'.

On this basis it appears that Tyddyn Elan expresses a regional variation on the personal name Elen, and this seems more than likely given the overwhelming presence of other related place-names in the Dolwyddelan area, with its abundance of folk-memory expressions. A couple of miles south of Caernarfon there is a farm estate called Tyddyn Elen, located in the south of the large parish of Llanbeblig. In the early

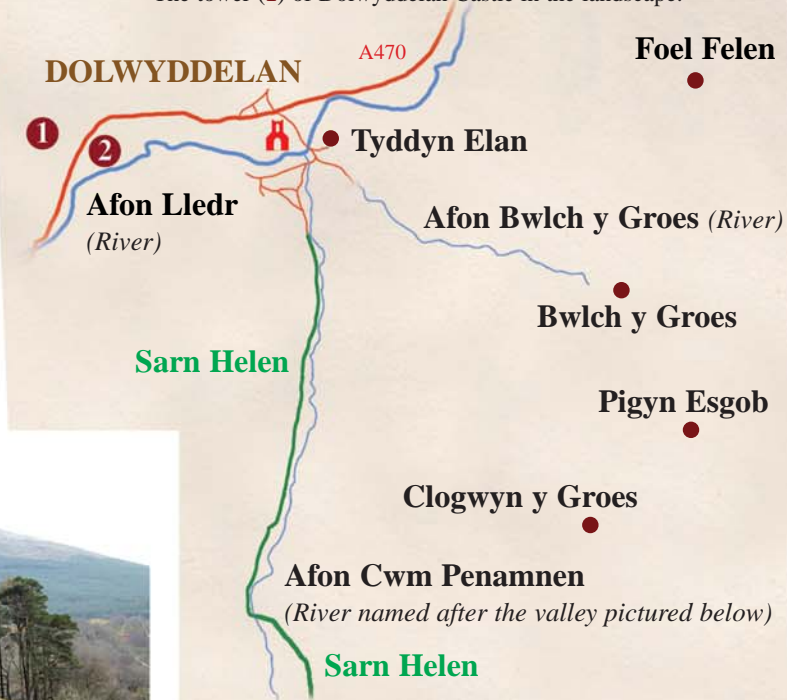


*"That valley, o'er whose crags, and sprinkled trees,  
And winding stream, so oft his eye had loved  
To linger, gazing, as the eve grew dim,  
From Dolwyddelan's tower..."*

Robert Southey (1774-1843)  
*Madoc* i.10, 1805



The tower (1) of Dolwyddelan Castle in the landscape.



1



2

1 – Dolwyddelan Castle was the stronghold of the kings of Gwynedd, guarding this strategic route into the heartland of Snowdonia.

2 – All that remains of the older castle, Tomen Castell, is the tree-clad rocky knoll on which it once stood.



ABOVE Sarn Helen winds its way towards Tomen y Mur.

LEFT An ancient track goes over a bridge to Penmachno.



19th-century Parliament passed the *Tithe Commutation Act* as part of the land tenure reform system, involving detailed surveys of land holdings. In 1843 the apportionment of the rent-charge in lieu of tithes was undertaken in the parish of Llanbeblig, and the maps and lists of field names show those belonging to Tyddyn Elen as including one called ‘*Cae Croes*’, quite obviously a field with a cross in it at some point in history. How this may have been connected with Saint Elen is now lost to us, but it is noteworthy that the name Helen has not been substituted in this place-name – nor Elan. It seems that once such names start to appear in the past beyond the confines of anglicised Caernarfon town itself, the name Elen survives in the more rural areas, where it escaped the substitution to that of Helen.

This place-name ambivalence is illustrated in Monmouthshire in south-eastern Wales, where some three miles south of the town of Abergavenny (Welsh name *Y Fenni*) lies the village of Llanelen. The originally 13th-century church is now dedicated to Saint Helen, traditionally perceived as referring to Emperor Constantine’s mother rather than the eponymous Welsh Saint Elen. In his *Handbook of the Origin of Place-Names in Wales and Monmouthshire* (1887), the Reverend Thomas Morgan says that the village name is derived ‘*from the church being dedicated to St. Ellen*’, and we saw earlier how both the churches of Llangystennin and Llanbeblig acquired 19th-century windows depicting Constantine’s mother, instead of Saint Elen, the actual mother of both Cystennin and Peblig. Constantine the Great’s mother has simply eclipsed another empress, whose role in history has been forgotten, except in the *Mabinogion*, the Welsh genealogies and the loosely-woven fabric of folk-memory, which by the 21st-century has become worn away and thread bare.

The historic flexibility in the spelling of personal names has certainly contributed to the conflation issue, along with the influence of the English language in Wales. John Speed’s map of Caernarvonshire from 1610 (below right) uses ‘*Dolathelan Castell*’ and it is an anglicised interpretation of the name. Perhaps something of a red herring, it would appear that the focus of attention on a ‘Little Irishman’ at Dolwyddelan may be comparatively recent (i.e. 16th-century), and that we should instead be focusing on the Welsh Saint Elen.

When looking up Dolwyddelan in the *Dictionary of the Place-Names of Wales* (2007 edition), we find several spelling variations obtained from 13th-century sources: ‘*Doluythelan* (1254), *Dolwydelan* (1269), and *Doluidelan* (1284)’. In the collection of transcriptions of state documents known as the *Foedera* by Thomas Rymer, we also find ‘*Dolynchelen in Snoudon*’ and ‘*Dolinthelen*’ in records dated 1283. Also from the 13th-century, in an agreement (*Letters Patent*, 18th May 1278) between members of the Welsh nobility, the Latin text gives the name as ‘*Dol Wydelan*’. In the Gwydir chapel of Llanrwst’s parish church, a memorial inscription from the 1600s uses ‘*Dolwethelan*’. By the 1700s ‘*Dolydelen*’<sup>36</sup> appears as the village’s name in property transaction documents of the time, so all this illustrates the ever-present evolution of a place-name and the inconsistencies in its spelling. And their true historic meaning, for that matter. Clearly, the uncertainty remains on the actual origin of this village’s name, although these inconsistencies in how a word was historically presented does not preclude the otherwise evident associations with Elen, so apparent even in the village’s property names, as shown in the photographs on page 79.

It is the place-names in the village’s surrounding landscape that we shall visit next, each of which are identified in the map on page 83 opposite. Once again we are up against the uncertainties presented by these toponyms, and there is no definitive way of shedding light on these questions – afterall, it was the *Dark Ages*. Nevertheless, what we can see on the map around Dolwyddelan, apart from Sarn Helen itself, are several thought provoking place-names: *Bwlch y Groes*, for example, could be the Pass of the Cross, the C of croes





(cross) having mutated to a G, while the Y is the definite article: The. This is located on a small river incorporating this same place-name. A more prosaic translation would be something along the lines that this is the crossing place for the pass (bwlch), but the immediate terrain may not be challenging enough to merit such a distinctive name. In any case, Sarn Helen – the obvious route through (bwlch/pass) the valley called Cwm Penamnen – is conveniently situated nearby. The fact that the river is called Afon Bwlch y Groes suggests rather more than a very localised spot, and river names do tend to be particularly ancient.

There are several places called Bwlch y Groes in Wales, a notable, high altitude one in Powys being between the town of Dolgellau and Lake Vyrnwy (Welsh *Llyn Efyrynwy*). North east of this lake is a location known in Welsh as Bwlch Croes Iorwerth, which could translate as the Pass of the Cross of Iorwerth, this being a personal name. Folk-memory tells us that it was here that Iorwerth Drwyndwn (c.1130-1174 – Edward with the flat nose) died in battle. He was the disinherited son of King Owain Gwynedd. This is simply another example of associations with a cross and a pass that do not necessarily derive from the actual terrain, but rather historic characters and their memory implanted in the Welsh landscape. An earlier ruler of Gwynedd, Gruffudd ap Llywelyn (1039-1064) is recorded in the *Annales Cambriae* as fighting a battle at Rhyd y Groes ar Hafren. This was in Powys and refers to a ford across the River Severn, the Welsh name of the river being Hafren. A cross once stood there and this illustrates how both a crossing-place (rhyd) and a cross (croes) – as opposed to ‘across’ (Welsh *ar draws*) – can combine in a place-name with less ambiguity when interpreted into English.

Commenting on Bwlch y Groes, Charles Cliffe in his guidebook for tourists exploring North Wales in Victorian times refers to a medieval cross, which may have commemorated Iorwerth Drwyndwn’s death in battle. Cliffe says that the place-name derived from ‘*a rude crucifix which was formerly to be seen on the top*’ of the pass, and he goes on to mention the nearby ‘*stream that falls into the [river] Twrch, about 7 miles from Bala, runs through Cwm y Groes*’, which means Valley of the Cross. The word twrch refers to a boar and an enchanted one appears in the *Mabinogion* story of Culhwch and Olwen, where Arthur plays a role in the hunting of this magical creature, ultimately leading to the union of the two main characters.

Leading from Dolwyddelan over the hills to the village of Penmachno are the remains of an ancient road, now simply designated as a footpath on the map. In medieval times it was clearly a significant route, as noted by a writer on the Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem in Wales. Known simply as the Knights Hospitaller and founded around 1099, this military order acquired the properties of the Knights Templar when that order was unjustly persecuted and banned by papal decree in the early 1300s: ‘*This road crossed the Conwy at Rhyd Saint [crossing-place of a saint] near Ysbyty Ifan [John’s Hospital], a short distance below the present bridge [...] thence crossing Bwlch y Groes to Dolwyddelan, where it met and crossed the Roman track [Sarn Helen] running north to Caerhun*’.<sup>37</sup> Here the saint in question is probably the John of the Hospitallers’ formal title.

This ancient route runs alongside the river and leads shortly after Bwlch y Groes to an otherwise unimpressive piece of isolated ground called Pigyn Esgob. Here we are encountering a name of religious significance, because it could translate as Bishop’s (Esgob) Spike (Pigyn). This link in the landscape to Christianity has to be of significance, even though there is now nothing visible in the actual terrain to tell us more. The Ordnance Survey maps from the 1800s merely show a roughly circular raised area surrounded by large rocks. And it is certainly a peculiar place-name that poses more questions than it answers. Nowadays this area is much given over to modern forestry plantations, so what may have once been clearly visible in the landscape is probably lost among the conifer woodland.

Nevertheless, *Roderick’s Welsh Dictionary* from 1737 could prove informative. From spike (Latin *spica*) the rather archaic English word spicknel is derived, a botanical reference, and the example given is ‘*ffenigl Helen Luyddog*’, with ‘*ffenigl*’ referring to the herbal and culinary plant fennel, while the personal name attached is, of course, the Elen from the *Mabinogion*. Turning to the later *Walter’s Welsh Dictionary* of 1828, we again find the same connection: ‘*ffenigl helen luyddawg* [spelling variation], *spignel*, or *baldmoney*’.



This association is confirmed in the modern *Welsh Academy Dictionary* (1995 edition) under the entry for baldmoney, a common name for the plant with the Latin title *Meum athamanticum*. Of the several types of fennel listed in the *Welsh Botany* (1813) by the Anglesey-born botanist Hugh Davies, only this one carries the association with Elen: '*Ffenigl Helen Lueddawg*'. The herbal uses of fennel are many and varied, but there is a definite link to women, as mentioned in Richard Greene's *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier* (1592): '*Uppon a banke, bordring by, grew women's weedes, Fenell I meane [...] fit generally for that sexe*'.<sup>38</sup> Also the plant baldmoney connects with Norse Mythology, since the 'bald' element of the name is said to be derived from the son of Odin named Baldr, a warrior whose name is thought to mean 'shining day', thereby giving him archetypal solar attributes. Variants of this god's name are used in the Norse stories as a honorific attached to the names of heroic individuals, and Elen certainly falls into the category of warrior heroine.

In further exploring the more ancient mythology associated with this herb, we learn that fennel seeds were often chewed by Roman soldiers before battle, believing that it instilled confidence and courage leading to victory. The original inspiration for this seems to have been the famous Battle of Marathon in 490BC, when the Athenians defeated a much larger army of Persians. The battle site is so called from Marathon being the Greek name for fennel, which grew there in abundance. So the aspiration for victory came to be associated with this plant. In Greek mythology it is said that Prometheus stole fire from the gods using the stalk of a fennel plant, so again courage and boldness find associations. It was probably the Romans who introduced this Mediterranean plant into Britain in the first place, and a brief reminder note in the handwritten manuscript of Richard Fenton's travel journal reads: '*Meum on Voelas Mount in Denbighshire, and at Dinas in Carnarvonshire – question why at these Roman forts, and whether planted there at first?*' Precisely when it came to be associated with Elen Luyddog is unknown, although it could have occurred in the Romano-British period, with folk-memory continuing the tradition of associations with this warrior princess.

As to fennel's pharmacological uses, the volatile oil is rich in the organic compound anethole, known to have a potent antimicrobial action and therefore useful in treating battle wounds to reduce infection. Although fennel's psychoactive chemistry is less certain, it was a herbal ingredient in the powerful alcoholic drink absinthe, the 19th-century recipe being known to have hallucinatory effects. In his poem *The Goblet of Life*, the 19th-century American writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow refers to fennel's historic associations with warriors:

*It gave new strength and fearless mood;  
And gladiators, fierce and rude,  
Mingled it in their daily food;  
And he who battled and subdued,  
A wreath of fennel wore.*

Given Elen Luyddog's military links with the legions we are likely to have discovered how fennel acquired its historic association in the Welsh language. It does not, however, provide us with a connection with a bishop, as such, although the topographic designation (esgob) may simply have sought to denote somewhere sacred in this particular landscape around Dolwyddelan. When and how this arose is presently unknown.





Continuing to explore the neighbourhood around Dolwyddelan, we find that there is also the place-name Clogwyn y Groes, which could mean the Cliff of the Cross. The landscape is distinctly precipitous in this spot, so it too may simply indicate the place where one can safely cross over the cliff, although there are far less steep routes nearby, making a mundane definition somewhat suspect. Again, we are just a short distance from Sarn Helen and its otherwise accommodating route through the mountainous valley of Cwm Penamnen. In this place are the feeder streams that lead to another river, Afon Wybrnant, which the *Place Names in Snowdonia* describes as meaning ‘Vale of Mists’, which is rather apposite given that the mists of time have already mystified too many ‘explanations’ for these place-names around Dolwyddelan.

A similar challenge faces us in the same place, where yet another undistinguished patch of ground raises a question: Foel Felen on the Ordnance Survey map (scale 1:25000). A literal translation might be ‘bare yellow’, although it does not make a lot of sense, since there is nothing particularly yellow about the place. A previously mentioned RCAHMW’s report may shed some light on this where, referring to another area of North Wales, it states: *‘the old trackway over the Berwyn mountains is now frequently called “Sarn Felyn,” “the yellow causeway,” or “Sarn Felin,” the “Mill Causeway,” both corruptions of the tradition which associates these early trackways with the Roman empress Helena’*. The original Welsh place-names would naturally have derived from the eponymous Elen Luyddog, thus illustrating yet another anglicisation by England’s surveyors and cartographers.

As previously observed, property owners in Gwynedd were much given to adopting the name Helen, other examples being Pentre Helen in Llanddeinolen, east of Caernarfon, and Maes Helen in the village of Llanfaglan, which is also near Caernarfon. Both of these examples appear in archive documents relating to the wider Coed Helen estates in Arfon and also on Anglesey. The issue is not limited to these landholdings of the gentry and it even finds expression in more ancient locations, such as a hill fort in the Conwy Valley, near the village of Llanbedr y Cennin. When Thomas Pennant visited the site in the 1770s, he referred to it as Pen Caer Helen (Head of Elen’s Fort), but the present name on maps is simply Pen y Gaer (Head of the Fort). Pennant was probably just repeating what local people called the site, expressing folk-memory of this ancient fortification, although what the connection was with the military exploits of Elen Luyddog is now lost to us. A photograph of this hill fort appears opposite on page 88.

Having previously looked at Croesor and Sarn Helen in the RCAHMW report for the old county of Merionethshire, we now turn to their inventory for Caernarvonshire East and what they have to say about the village of Dolwyddelan. Under the entry for ‘old wells’, it very briefly describes the ruined and overgrown site of Ffynnon Elen, a small rectangular construction, adding that, *‘the name has also been applied to a natural spring about 100 yards to the N.W.’*. As at nearby Croesor, we again find Elen’s links to springs and wells, and members of Dolwyddelan’s community have recently restored Elen’s Well with the aid of charitable funding. The well is located behind the Elen’s Castle Hotel, accessed along a short footpath, and it is praiseworthy to find that such places are still cherished even in the 21st-century.

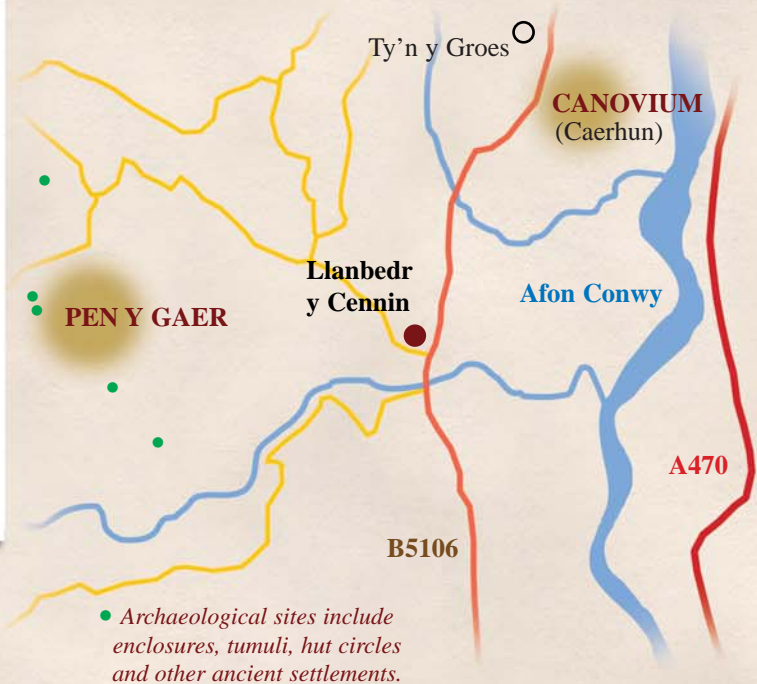
Dolwyddelan Castle today is a ruin of what was once an important medieval stronghold for the rulers of Gwynedd, and near to it is an even older site called Tomen Castell, about which far less seems to be known. The RCAHMW inventory simply describes that it was located on a *‘natural rocky knoll’* (hillock or tomen) and on the top are *‘traces of what may have been a tower about 25 feet square’*.<sup>39</sup> Tomen Castell certainly pre-dates the more substantial medieval stone castle across the main road in Dolwyddelan, and tradition says that it was the birthplace, around 1173, of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth – Llywelyn the Great. Could Tomen Castell have been the Elen’s Castle expressed in the name of the village’s hotel? The present name of the older of these two castles is purely descriptive: a castle on a mound. In its day, whenever that originally was, it may well have been associated with Elen the fort-builder of the *Mabinogion*, just as the nearby Roman road, Sarn Helen was since ancient times.

Today only the tomen or site of the older castle remains, shaded by trees in the valley landscape, much of which was once owned by the Gwydir family. The book, *The History of the Gwydir Family* contains

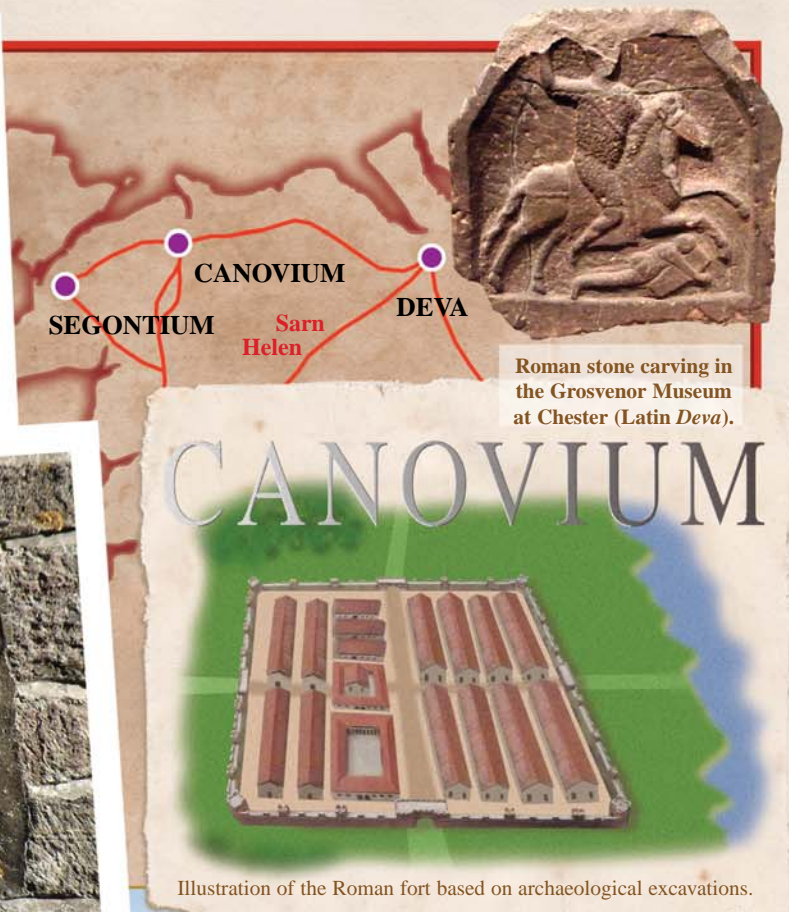




The hillfort from the Iron Age or Romano-British period that was once known as Pen Caer Helen, now simply marked on OS maps as Pen y Gaer.



Saint Mary's church is enclosed by trees at Caerhun on the banks of the Conwy.





THE EAST VIEW OF DOLWYDDELAN CASTLE, IN THE COUNTY OF CAERNARVON.



In the most Noble PEREGRINE Duke of Ancaster and Kingston, Marquis and Earl of Ulster, Baron Willoughby of Parham and Eversby, Secretary Great Chamberlain of England, one of his Majesty's most Honourable Privy Council, Lord Lieutenant and Captain General of the County, County and City of Lincoln.

This Prospect is humbly Inscribed by  
many of please to Grace  
W. Granger most Honourable Secretary  
London, 1742.



DOLWYDDELAN signifies the Castle of the Valley of Helen's Wood, and from hence there is an ancient Road, through the Mountains, towards the Sea Coast of Merionethshire called Sarn Helen, or Helen's Way; which is supposed to have been made by Helena the Mother of Constantine the Great. Dolwyddelen was therefore probably a strong hold before the time of that Emperor; but the Castle (the ruins of which are here represented) is thought to have been built by the Britains about AD 500 on their first retreat to Wales. The present Possessor is his Grace the Duke of Ancaster.

an engraving (reproduced above) from 1742 that shows the ruins of the later castle of Dolwyddelan, the possible site of the older of the two just managing to appear in the bottom left-hand corner. The engraving itself is the work of two brothers, Samuel and Nathaniel Buck, who travelled extensively and produced a large number of topographical prints for the increasingly popular antiquarian market of the 18th-century. The text that appears below-right in the engraving represents what the Buck brothers were able to glean about the place and it is quoted here in full: 'Dolwyddelen signifies the Castle of the Valley of Helen's Wood, and from hence there is an ancient road, through the mountains, towards the sea coast of Merionethshire called Sarn Helen, or Helen's Way; which is supposed to have been made by Helena the mother of Constantine the Great; Dolwyddelen was therefore probably a strong hold before the time of that Emperor; but the Castle (the ruins of which are here represented) is thought to have been built by the Britains about AD 500 on their first retreat to Wales. The present possessor is his Grace the Duke of Ancaster'.

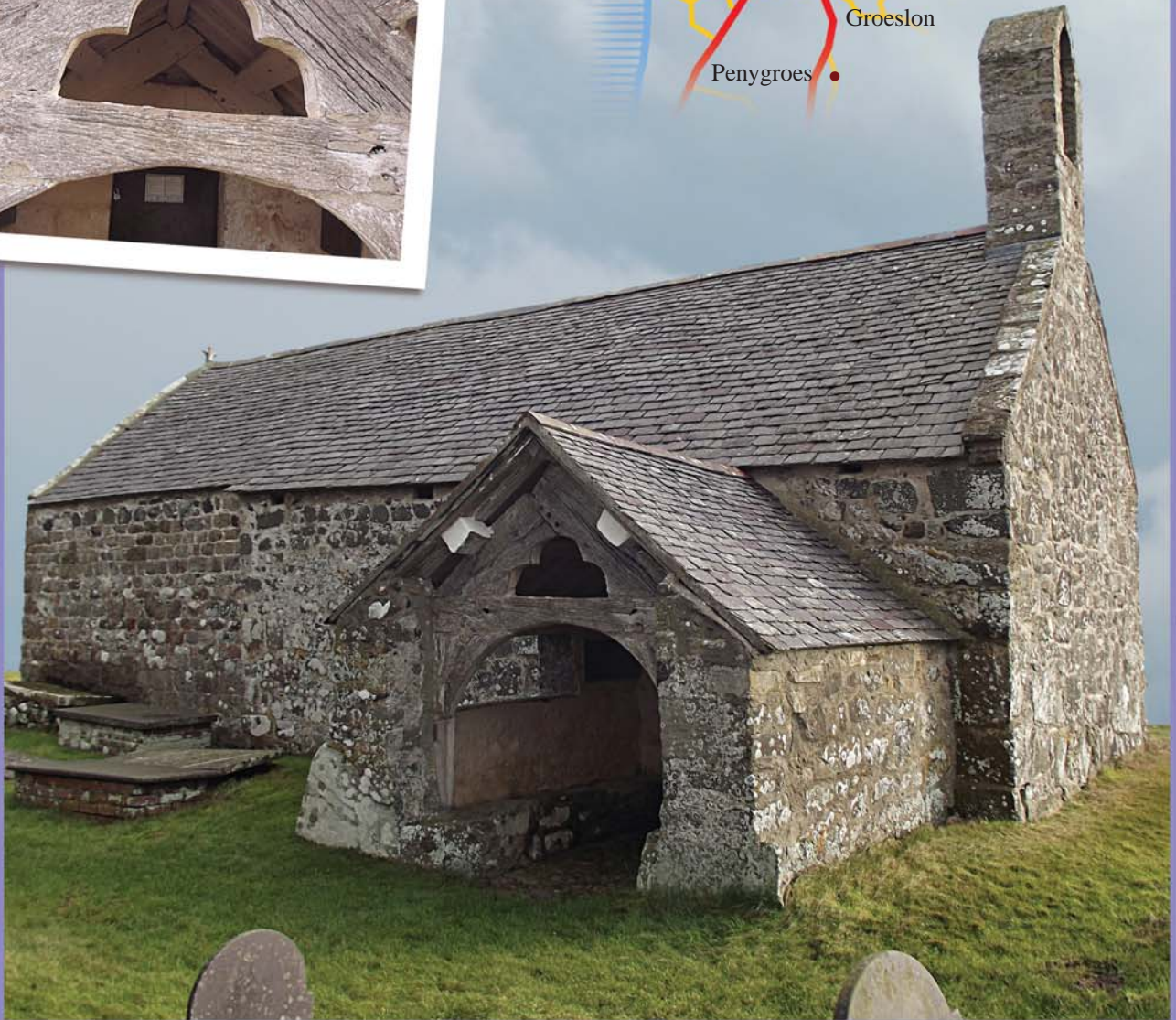
There is no archaeological evidence so far of building work from the 6th-century, although it is in no way unusual for medieval military structures to be constructed on earlier fortified sites. A good defensive position in the landscape would always remain so in any period, as evidenced at Roman Tomen y Mur with its later Norman fortifications. It is also possible that the text is actually confused and that the reference is to the older fort, no longer extant by the 1700s. The Buck brothers' reference to 'Helen's Wood' is echoed in the contemporaneous writings of Lewis Morris, who provides his definition of the village's name as 'Dol-wydd-Elen, i.e. the Valley of Elen's Wood'. Clearly, the evidence is mounting for the need to reinterpret the derivation of the name of the village of Dolwyddelan, but many people will remain sceptical because Elen is widely regarded as 'mythological' and therefore unworthy of serious study.

We are reminded here of the Helen's Wood (Coed Helen) estate at Caernarfon, where another holy person who is relevant to our story established his llan. He was Saint Baglan of the 7th-century and his beautiful and isolated little church (pictured opposite on page 90) is located close to the Caernarfon coastal area, near the village that bears his name: Llanfaglan, the B having mutated to F. When the antiquary Richard Fenton was in this location at the beginning of the 1800s, he recorded a local saying: 'The Way to Heaven is by Llanfaglan Road'. Obviously, it was a location of profound spiritual significance, and a nearby field was known as Maes y Grogwyn. Ordinarily, the Welsh word for a field would be cae in the mundane agricultural sense, but when the word maes is used it is rather like how in England the phrase 'village green' would be



## Saint Baglan's Church

ANGLESEY





used, so as to distinguish a land area from just another ordinary field. It means it was noted for a particular usage by the community. The word grogwyn in the name suggests that a white (wyn) cross or crucifix (crog/grog) once stood here, and it was probably the preaching cross of Saint Baglan. The relevance here of this saint emerges in the genealogical manuscripts called *Bonedd y Seint*, where he is described as the son of Dingab ab Nudd Hael, whose ancestors are recorded as including Maccsen Wledig and Elen Luyddog.

As to the saint's church itself, there is an inscribed gravestone from the 5th or early 6th-century incorporated as a lintel into the fabric of the present building. The inscription (Latin *Fili Lovernii Anatemori*) says that it was the gravestone of someone called Anatemarios, son of Loverniws. In a study of the area from 1882, the author observed '*several inscribed stones, evidently of the Roman period, built into the walls of the church*'.<sup>40</sup> It was discovered in 2005 that the older part of the cemetery and the church were within a pentagonal enclosure, a mysterious topographical feature not usually found in the context of a Christian site, and there is no satisfactory explanation. There was once a holy well – Ffynnon Faglan – nearby, but this has now been covered, apparently to avoid accidents to the farmer's livestock.

One of the more unusual finds at nearby Segontium was turned up by the 19th-century local vicar, a Reverend Trevor. A topographical publication from 1834 describes the found item, which appears to indicate a link with very early Christianity in Britain, the reference being to a man named Basilides. He was a teacher in Egypt, active from 117 to 138 in Alexandria, and he claimed to have received his teachings from the apostle Matthew. Basilides practiced a form of Gnosticism, an early branch of Christianity that had strong elements of mysticism and pagan influences, far removed from the mainstream of the later Roman Catholic Church. The item that the vicar turned up at Segontium was described thus: '*In 1827, several Roman coins and valuable relics were discovered. Among the latter was found a very thin piece of gold, four inches long and one inch broad, inscribed with mystic characters, principally Greek, which, from their form, appear to be of the second century, and by the import of the names and epithets, of which some are Hebrew, show it to be a Basilidian talisman. The Basilidian heresy, according to Irenaeus, prevailed in Gaul immediately after the Apostolic age*'.<sup>41</sup> A 2nd-century theologian, Irenaeus was devoted to the Church of Rome and he spearheaded campaigns against those who challenged its authority as so-called heretics.

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For the artists of the 18th and 19th centuries, Snowdonia provided the perfect subject to capture the spirit of the Romantic Movement. Dolwyddelan in particular, with its castle ruins and mountain backdrop proved a regular attraction for an artist like Alfred William Hunt (1830-1896), two of whose paintings are shown upper left. David Cox (1753-1859) went to Dolwyddelan to paint many times, and he exhibited paintings of the area in 1845, 1847 and again

in 1851. One of his paintings (lower left) was engraved by William Radclyffe (1783-1855) and in the oval-shaped detail of this we see Sarn Helen in the foreground as it meanders its way from Cwm Penamnen towards the castle and village.





Inevitably with folk-memory the 'record' is of an oral rather than textual nature, and as people and communities expire, so also do these traditional records as they fade into obscurity with their transient guardians. Some survive, largely thanks to antiquaries and historians, and the learned journals and periodicals of these men and women become the archives available to us today. One such, the *Bye-gones Relating to Wales and the Border Counties* provides a rich seam for mining these treasures from the past, including Sarn Helen with its many associated stories. This periodical recounts that in Denbighshire there is an area called Hiraethog, where this Roman road was known locally as 'Llwybr Elen', which means Elen's Path. A nugget of information from this *Bye-gones* publication presents a piece of folk-memory about where Elen's 'favourite greyhound died, and where a great carnedd in its memory still existed, then [Elen's Path passes] by Moel yr Eglwys, where she founded a church.'<sup>42</sup> The site in question consists of the remains of a large, circular burial cairn on the summit of a mountain called Arenig Fawr (Great/High Ground), near to the town of Bala. Its Welsh name would roughly translate as the Chapel on the Bare Hill, although nothing now remains to suggest a place of early Christian worship. Curiously, the site is also known as Eglwys Glominog, and while eglwys means church the second word is of unknown origin and may be a personal name. It is recorded that there was a hermitage there in the 15th-century, so the chapel from Elen's era of the 4th-century was, presumably, continuing to be used in later periods before its complete disappearance.

From the fascinating village of Dolwyddelan in the Conwy Valley, Sarn Helen heads north, at times disappearing into forestry plantations that disguise its course. Eventually, it emerges into the valley on the banks of the River Conwy and continues its journey to the Roman fort of Canovium, known in Welsh as Caerhun from its post-Roman occupation by King Rhun Hir (died c.586 AD) of Gwynedd. Part of the site of Canovium is occupied by the 14th-century church of Saint Mary, among the trees and close to the Conwy, the Roman name of which is thought to have contributed to that of the fort itself. An ancient and weathered carving of the crucifixion appears in a niche above the entrance to the church, as shown in the photograph on page 88. It was from Canovium that the Roman road eventually branched off west to Segontium. And west of Canovium itself, in the Carneddau range, stands a mountain simply called Yr Elen – The Elen. It is not known when and why this mountain acquired its name, although it is evidently celebrating our 4th-century heroine. Heading east the roads led towards Deva Victrix, the major Roman city of Chester, known to the Welsh as Caer lleon fawr ar Dwyfrdwy – the fort of the great legion on the River Dee. Both the words Caer and Chester are said to have ultimately derived from the Latin word *castrum* meaning a fort, although some scholars dispute this derivation for the Welsh word.

As we have seen, Elen Luyddog is widely celebrated in the topography of Wales, even though the name of Constantine's mother is often substituted, either for dubious reasons or simple ignorance. Among Snowdonia's mountainous terrain she is also recorded in a place-name on the edge of the Beddgelert Forest. The modern Ordnance Survey maps name the place as Moel yr Ogof (Hill of the Cave), but it was anciently known as the Hill of Elen's Cave. It has been challenging enough finding the name of Helen being substituted in cartography for that of Elen, as we have searched in the landscape, but here, as elsewhere, she has been erased forever. In a sense she has become extinct, although in the wells of knowledge in folk-memory she clings on to survival – just.

Nevertheless, our journey along Sarn Helen goes on, as does our pilgrimage towards the *Welsh Cross*, and in the next chapter we continue to wander through the 'Dark Ages', a term coined by romano-centric antiquaries and other historians to express their seemingly heart-felt lament on the loss of the 'civilising influence' of Rome after the year 400. The Britons are going it alone in facing the foreign invaders, who centuries later established what became known as England.











ate in the 300s what was left of the Roman troops, following the exodus under Magnus Maximus began to pack up in readiness to leave their former province of Britannia to its own devices. The few remaining soldiers and their leaders were now preoccupied with what was happening to Rome itself. The Germanic tribes of the north known as the Visigoths, led by their King Alaric (c.370-410), had marched towards Rome, and after some initial defeats they eventually sacked the Eternal City in 410, spending several days wreaking havoc and devastation among the population. The power games at the time were as complex as ever, although the Roman Empire had shortly before been under the rule of a single emperor, Theodosius the Great (347-395), whose sons Arcadius and Honorius inherited the two halves of the empire after his death. Theodosius had, in fact, previously made full use of the Germanic *foederati* to promote his own ambitions, little knowing he was to unwittingly unleash these hounds of war upon Rome itself.

As we have read in the previous chapter, Magnus Maximus (Macsen Wledig) had been defeated by Theodosius and been put to death in 388. Was it then that his partner Elen Luyddog and their children returned to Britain? Remaining in mainland Europe would have easily exposed her to the wrath of Theodosius, who like emperors before him would have been keen to eradicate any dynastic ambitions of others to regain the imperial throne. The sources are largely silent on this widow's destination and destiny. In any event, Theodosius had his hands full with more challenging matters, both of a military and a spiritual nature. In February of the year 380 Theodosius had demanded all the empire's subjects should only follow the Christian faith as promulgated and practiced by Damasus, the Bishop of Rome. This was followed over the next couple of years by various imperial edicts against those who did not adhere to Roman dogma, with countless 'heretics' becoming spiritual victims of a militarily-imposed religious monopoly.

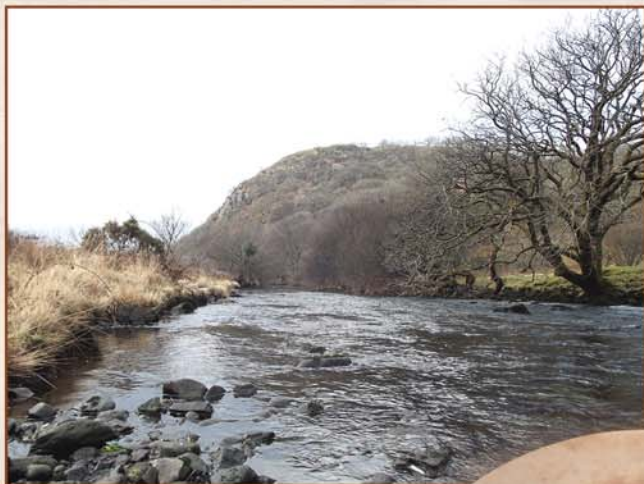
Writing of our erstwhile hero of the *Mabinogion*, Macsen Wledig, the 6th-century historian Gildas did not pull any punches when expressing what he thought of the man, whom he said had, '*furiously pushed his rebellion against the lawful emperors*', adding that Macsen achieved his aims by '*cunning arts rather than valour*' while indulging in '*perjury and falsehood*'. Obviously, Gildas had his own agenda at the time, although his description of how foreign invasion felt probably summed it up for most of his contemporaries, when he spoke of '*the groans of the Britons*': '*The barbarians drive us to the sea; the sea throws us back on the barbarians: thus two modes of death await us, we are either slain or drowned*'. Gildas goes on to say how Britain's rulers at the time had sealed their island's doom '*by inviting in among them, like wolves into the sheep-fold, the fierce and impious Saxons, a race hateful both to God and men, to repel the invasions of the northern nations. Nothing was ever so pernicious to our country, nothing was ever so unlucky!*'<sup>1</sup> For the sake of a balanced view of history, it is worth noting that Maximus himself persecuted so-called heretics, but that was obviously not enough for Gildas to pull a punch or two.

Gildas could almost be echoing the fate of Rome following the death of Theodosius, the imperial city having chosen unpredictable and ultimately unreliable allies. In the case of Britain, it was not the Goths but other Germanic tribes including the Saxons, all of whom were keen to grab a piece of what remained of the seemingly abandoned Britannia. Initially engaged by Britons as mercenaries in the fight against the invading tribes from what is now Scotland, the Saxons seized the opportunity to turn against their employers and carve out a new homeland for themselves. Historic folk-memory tends to put the responsibility for this calamity on the shoulders of a British ruler called Vortigern, a latinised form of the Celtic title Gwrtheyrn, meaning 'supreme king'. His cognomen of Gwrtheneu perhaps reflected his less than impressive performance as a warrior, since it means 'very thin' – 'Gwrtheyrn the Meagre' as the triad called him. So the fate of the Britons was not resting on the broad shoulders needed for the challenge confronting his people, and history generally had a low regard for this individual.

Vortigern's abortive castle building efforts at Dinas Emrys, near Beddgelert in Gwynedd, became the stuff of Arthurian legends, and its location is shown in the map on page 95. Having fled west to escape the Saxon incursions, Vortigern sought to build a castle in this location, but after many attempts the construction



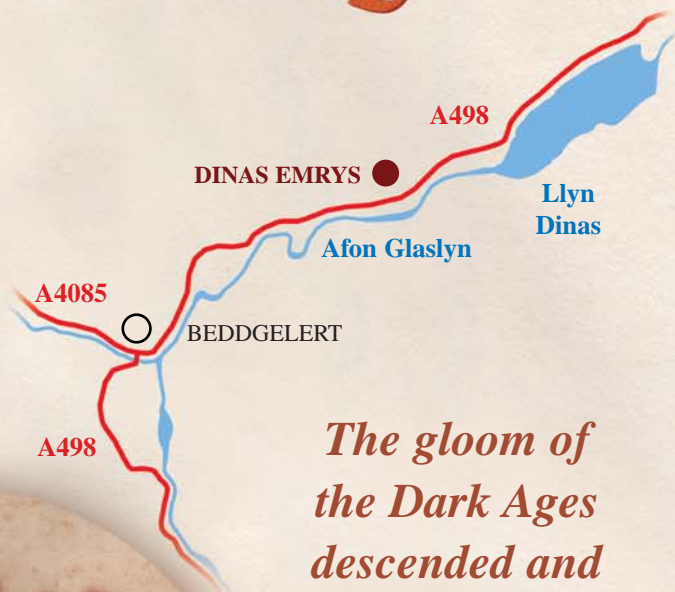
# The Ruin of Vortigern



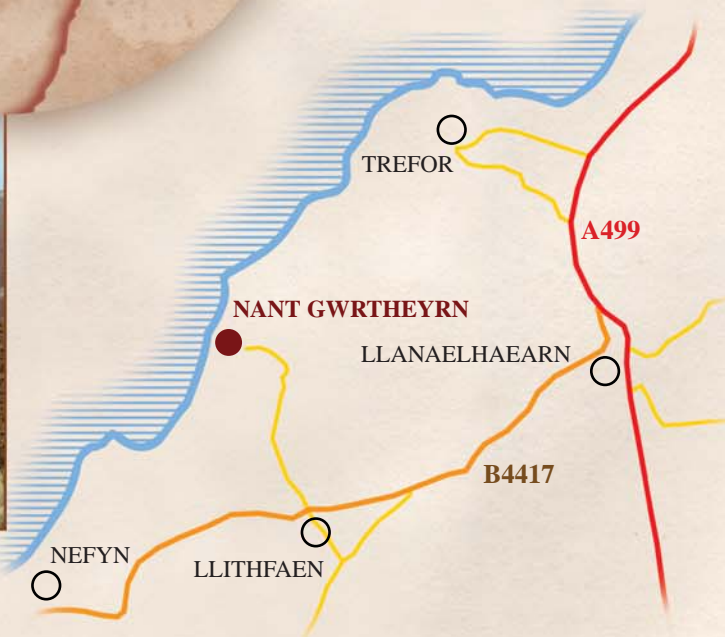
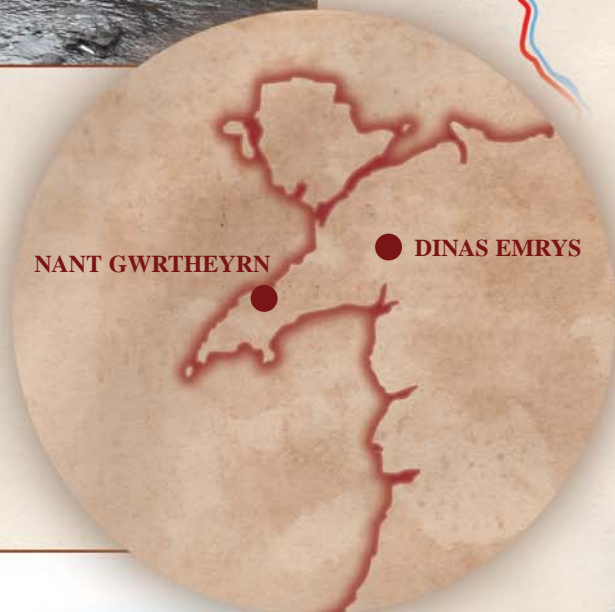
The promontory of **Dinas Emrys** towering over the Afon Glaslyn. It was here that Vortigern finally built his fortress through the magical intervention of Merlin.



A steep sided valley and the surrounding mountains provided **Nant Gwrtheyrn** with a seemingly safe coastal location for Vortigern's retreat from the ruin confronting the Britons.



*The gloom of the Dark Ages descended and with it the groans of the Britons grew ever more faint to the ears of Rome.*





programme failed, the fortress collapsing overnight after each day's work. Fearing that dark magic was behind the failure, he was advised to seek out a young boy born of a virgin mother, the intention being to sacrifice the youth to appease the demonic force behind the supernatural events. Eventually, a youth named Merlin (Welsh *Myrddin Emrys*) was found and brought to the site, and it was he who revealed that beneath the foundations lay a pool with two fighting dragons, one white (thought to represent the Saxons) and the other red (the Britons). The story of how the dragons came to be there is told in the *Mabinogion* tale of *Lludd and Llefelys*. Once the dragons were successfully removed the castle-building succeeded.

Vortigern is said by some to have been buried in Gwynedd at a coastal location known as Nant Gwrtheyrn, identified on page 95. Exploring this area in the 17th-century, a churchman and antiquary recorded his experiences in his book published in 1695: *'This commodious place did Gourtigern [Gwrtheyrn/Vortigern] choose for his last refuge, where by all likelihood he died. And besides his passage still retaining his name there, a place there called Bedn [Bedd] Gourtigern his grave, which was a hillock raised and stones heaped up after the manner of burying the princes and kings in those times; the inhabitants of the parish of Llanoyhayarn [Llanaelhaearn], where his grave was, for better proof of the truth thereof, assembled themselves together, digged down that heap of earth, and removed the great heap of stones, and in a stone chest found the body of a very tall man'*.<sup>2</sup> If this piece of folk-memory is accurate, then it appears that Vortigern was remarkably tall and very thin; the use in the triad of 'meagre' is probably more figurative than physical. What became of his remains after this casual attempt at community archaeology is not recorded.

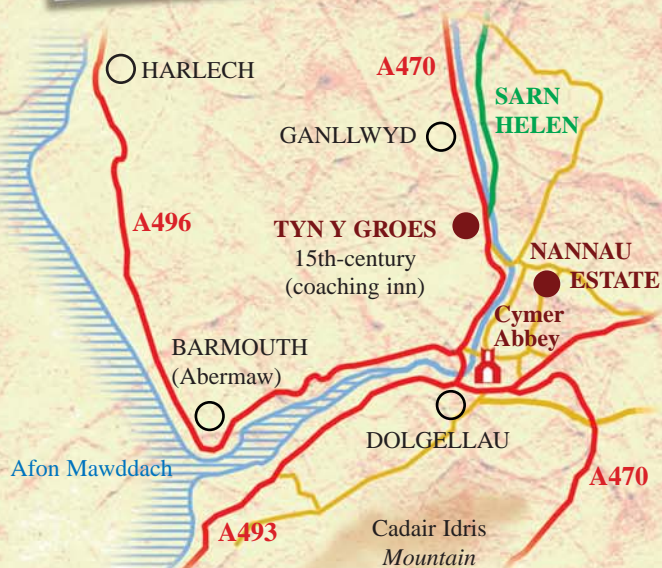
The power vacuum left in Britain saw the great King Arthur waging his holy wars against the largely Germanic foe, who were invading during the 5th-century and later. The Anglo-Saxon conquest was now well underway, leaving the Britons hoping their Christianity would save them from the heathen hords driving them ever westward towards the sea, as Gildas bemoaned. It was these foreign invaders who labelled the native Britons 'welsh', which, as previously mentioned, meant in their tongue – with no hint of being ironic – 'the foreigners'. Roman roads like Sarn Helen became the route for one army after another, each struggling to achieve control over the former Roman province. The gloom of the Dark Ages descended and with it the groans of the Britons grew ever more faint to the ears of Rome.

Equally faint is the trail on the ground, where Sarn Helen now winds its way south through Wales, as one 18th-century traveller, Thomas Rees, observed: *'On our enquiring of a peasant, whom we saw standing in a field by the road side, if he knew anything of the Sarn Helen? "Yes," replied he, "I stand upon it now, and I but lately dug up the stones with which it was paved." It is visible at intervals as far as the New Inn; between which place and Caermarthen, I could see no appearance of it, but its direction to that place is certain'*. Continuing his account, Rees goes on to say: *'The next road that occurs is the Sarn Helen, forming the communication between Neath and Caer Bannau'*.<sup>3</sup>

It will be recalled from the previous chapter that Caermarthen was the location for one of the forts Elen required to be built as part of the marriage settlement with Magnus Maximus, according to the story in the *Mabinogion*. Just north-east of Carmarthen lies a hill known as Frenni Fawr, although in local folk-memory the place-name is Cadair Macsen. This would translate as the seat or throne of this emperor, so once more Welsh topography reveals ancient connections with this Roman emperor. Sarn Helen's appearance in South Wales was also mentioned in a letter (signed 'Ned Lloyd') of 10th October 1693 from the antiquary Edward Lhwyd, who was at Oxford when he corresponded with the Reverend Joseph Lloyd, a schoolmaster at Ruthin in Denbighshire: *'I met with fordh Helen lueddog in Glamorganshire, Brecknockshire and Cardiganshire; so that I suppose it was continued through all Wales.'*<sup>4</sup>

As we head south with Sarn Helen from the Roman base of Tomen y Mur, we travel towards the town of Dolgellau through the village of Ganllwyd, passing by the 15th-century coaching inn called Tyn y Groes; meaning house (Welsh *Ty*), or smallholding (map page 97). Prior to the building of the present road (A470), Sarn Helen was the route used through this valley, where the Afon Mawddach winds its way towards the sea at Barmouth (Welsh *Abermaw*). As with the Elen's Castle Hotel in the village of Dolwyddelan, we are





again encountering folk-memory on the ground, and further north there is also a community in the Conwy Valley called Ty'n y Groes, where there is a 'cross' location called the Groes Inn, dating from the early 1500s. Opposite on page 98 is a photograph of this inn and its location is marked on the map that appears on page 88.

Once again the major difficulty in identifying the origin of relevant place-names rests on the use of the Welsh word *croes*, which, as well as referring to a cross in the crucifixion sense could simply indicate a road intersection like a cross road. Although the word *grosffordd* may be more appropriate in modern Welsh usage, in more distant times the Welsh word *croeshynt* was used to denote a route cross-way, according to Thomas Richard's *Dictionary* of 1839. In the case of the Conwy Valley place-name, there are road intersections fairly near to the inn, although not now a crossroads as such, while the village itself, Ty'n y Groes is centred on crossroads. And in any event, the question must also arise as to which cross is being referred to in a given location and place-name.

Fortunately, other property names near this inn can help refine the identification process, including an early 16th-century cottage called *Croes Ynyd* that stood nearby the inn. The meaning of this Welsh name could translate as Shrove Cross, suggesting a monumental cross which was used during the Shrovetide festivities that preceded Lent in the Christian calendar. Just along the road (B5106) from here is another property, *Cwrt y Groes*, the word *cwrt* suggesting a courtyard, although a dictionary from 1832 says that the word could also be used to indicate 'a circular mound'. There is then ample topographical information in this location to conclude that the names derive from a no longer extant, and probably ancient monumental





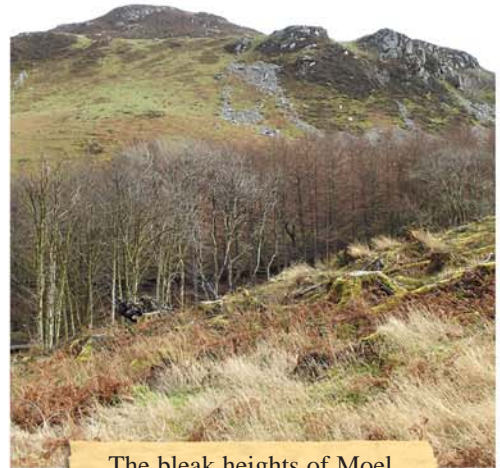
stone cross, a focal point for the community's Christian festivals. This is probably also the case with the 15th-century inn Tyn y Groes near Ganllwyd, which is featured opposite on page 97.

A short distance across the valley from there is the Nannau Estate, also marked on the map on page 97. This site was established in the 12th-century by Cadwgan ap Bleddyn (1051-1111), a ruler of Powys and South Wales, whose father, Bleddyn ap Cynfyn (died 1075) also ruled Gwynedd. Located on the Nannau Estate is a wooded area called Coed y Groes, meaning, without any possible confusion, the Wood of the Cross, and it is pictured below. This area only acquired the Nannau name in the much later Tudor period, the Welsh title being said to be a reference to streams; plural nentydd, singular nant.

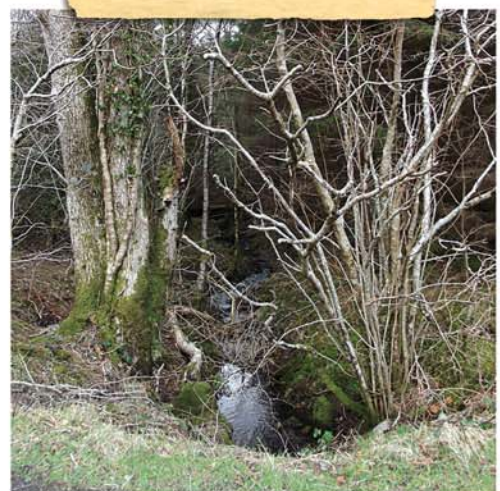
Before that it was known as Tyddyn Llanfair, which would mean a small farm connected to a holy place dedicated to Mary (Welsh *Mair*, with M mutated to F), the mother of Jesus. This may derive from the estate being a couple of miles from the Cistercian's Cymer Abbey, which was dedicated to Mary upon its foundation in 1158-9. The abbey site is marked on the map on page 97 opposite.

Another nearby location is called Cefn-Llanfair, with *cefn* meaning the back of something or behind. Nannau is adjacent to the mountainous Foel Offrwm, which literally translates – somewhat vaguely – as meaning bare offering, and two ancient hillforts dominate its summit. This place-name spelling is as it is given on Ordnance Survey maps, but turning to an early 19th-century journal, *The Cambro-Briton*, the location is described as 'a huge and gloomy mass of rock, called Moel Oerthrom or the Mount of Oppression'. The writer goes on to say that 'the beauty of the surrounding scenery was such, as to engender feelings of pure and holy tranquillity'.<sup>5</sup> The more correctly named Moel Offrwm would imply that this is the bare hill where offerings were made, thus hinting at a pagan origin.

We have no certain way of ascertaining which particular cross is associated with this area, although the close proximity to Sarn Helen is temptingly evocative of this book's core themes: Saint Elen and the *Welsh Cross*. The Welsh traveller Richard Fenton was in this area during the early 1800s, and he was challenged in his search for Sarn Helen in this vicinity: 'I asked a countryman, having observed something like an old paved way striking rather up from the present road, if he knew, or had heard, of any old Sarns in that part of the country, he told me there was very near one of that description observable, which took direction towards Dolgelly above Corsygedol'.<sup>6</sup> The name 'Dolgelly' is the town of Dolgellau and Cors y Gedol is a pre-historic settlement with a burial chamber. Further up the valley Fenton had also noted the bridge called Pont Abergeirw, recording that it was locally referred to as Pont Helen – Helen's Bridge, or more accurately Elen's Bridge.



The bleak heights of Moel Offrwm, and below is the mysterious Wood of the Cross, Coed y Groes at Nannau.





## What's in a name?

*...in the village of Nefyn.*



*The situation in the town of Nefyn illustrates the problem in determining the place-name issue, since a monumental cross once stood in the centre of the crossroads. A road sign saying 'Y Groes' is next to this intersection, and a neighbouring property is called 'Is-y-Groes', meaning below the cross. Further down this same road is a property called 'Cae Groes', which could refer to a field with a cross; no longer extant. There was once a c.7th-century inscribed standing stone in this area, but today we only find a lintel above a cowshed door.*

In contemplating the place-name challenge that is confronting us, it also arises with the Welsh word *crog*. In interpreting historic names we may be on safer ground here, with, for example, *crogau* specifically meaning crosses as in crucifixion. The Welsh for the day of the crucifixion, Good Friday, reads 'dydd gwener y *grog*lith', while Holy Cross Day in the Christian calendar would read in Welsh, 'Gwyl y Grog'. The use of *crog* appears to be more archaic than *croes*, as does the less common form of the Welsh word for a cross, *crwys*, although this may be no more than a spelling variation of *croes* as expressed phonetically. The distinctive use of the word *crog* would appear to relate specifically to a crucifix, a cross surmounted by the figure of Jesus. In Thomas Richards' Welsh dictionary from 1839, several usage examples are given and it is clearly to do with hanging: *crogiad* – a hanging; *crogpren* and *crogwydd* – a gallows or gibbet.

As we have found, distinguishing between Saint Elen of Caernarfon and Saint Helen of Constantinople in place-names is equally challenging. A late 19th-century study also encountered this issue: 'There is a *Llanelen* in Monmouthshire (called "*Eccl. de Sancta Elena*" in the *Norwich Taxatio*, 1254), and a now extinct *Llanelen* in the parish of *Llanrhidian*, in West Gower. *Bletherston*, in *Pembrokeshire*, now dedicated to *S. Mary*, is called in Welsh *Tref Elen*, and there is an *Elen's Well* in *Llawhaden* parish'. The authors also mention that the 'site of *Caer Elen* [Elen's Fort], near *Llanfihangel yn Nhowyn*, Anglesey, is on the old Roman road to *Holyhead*'.<sup>7</sup>

This particular area of Anglesey (shown opposite on page 100) may hold some interesting clues relating to both Elen Luyddog and her partner Macsen. On the Ordnance Survey map (Landranger 114, edition 1988), '*Caer Elen*' (Elen's Fort) is given as *Cae Elen*, thus altering the meaning: *cae* means field. The simple loss of the letter R at the end produces a significant



## Elen and Macsen in Anglesey

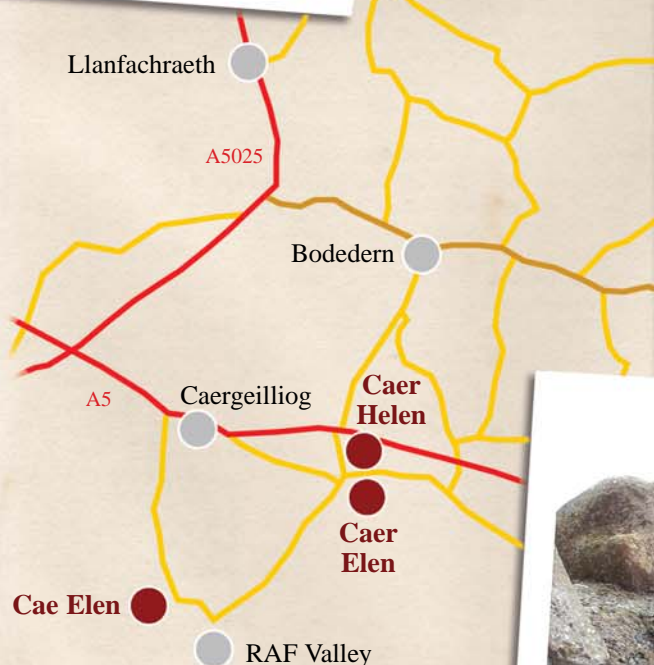
There can be few other locations in Wales where the imperial couple, Elen and Macsen, are recorded in the topography with such clarity. Although we cannot now trace what took place here in the late 4th-century, their presence is evident in the place-names of the area.



The lane entering Stryd y Facsen (left) looks like any other, and yet somewhere beneath the surface lies a Roman road that merited the remembrance of the Emperor Macsen. His partner Elen is also recorded in the site shown below, where her fort once stood. Today there is only a radio mast.

### Bedd Branwen

#### Stryd y Facsen



Caer Elen farm (right) retains the place-name record of the illustrious saint and warrior princess, whose fort once stood nearby.



change to the place-name. Fortunately, when the RCAHMW inspectors drew up their report (1937) on Anglesey's important sites, they correctly identified it as *Caer Elen* and listed it as '*unclassified*' under the heading of the nearby village of Bodedern: '*Caer Helen, site of an earthwork marked as Roman on the Ordnance maps*'. The brief description of the site goes on to say that, '*it commands a wide view in all directions and adjoins the route which any direct road to Holyhead from Segontium would have followed*'. Unfortunately for our investigations, what may have been there is long gone, the RCAHMW inspector's report describing the condition as '*poor, almost ploughed out*'.<sup>8</sup>

As well as the modern map change from *caer* to *cae*, earlier references were to *Helen* rather than *Elen*, as evidenced by a 19th-century archaeological journal, which observed that, '*the lines of road from Canovium and Segontium converge at a spot where a small camp stood, still called Caer Helen*'.<sup>9</sup> Another edition of this journal remarked on *Caer Helen*, saying '*it is considered by the compilers of the Ordnance map as a Roman station, but we are not aware of any authority for this supposition, beyond the traditional name of Helen*'.<sup>10</sup> By the time the Royal Commission was taking evidence in 1909 on the monuments of Wales and Monmouthshire, one expert was asked about whether any archaeological investigations had taken place at *Caer Helen/Elen* and he replied that he was unaware of any such exploration. Since the site was reported as '*ploughed out*' a couple of decades later, there was obviously not much left for archaeologists to explore.

The reason for the alarming loss of this and other sites is given in the evidence presented to this Royal Commission by the antiquary Edward Neil Baynes. He explained to the commissioners the sorry state of affairs since the 17th-century. Ancient monuments in Anglesey had been '*demolished in order to supply building material for the houses, and the walls of the fields and roads. They have also served as quarries for road metalling. To give a recent case: only about twelve or fifteen years ago a cromlech on Bodafon Mountain was broken up, the stones being laid on a new road*'.<sup>11</sup>

What possessed map makers at the Ordnance Survey to tinker with Welsh history on the ground is not known, and it was commented on as early as 1846 in the antiquarian journal, *Archaeologia Cambrensis*. A correspondent signing himself '*Gwyrfaiensis*' said that, '*it is to be lamented that more attention was not paid to Welsh nomenclature in the construction of these maps*'. In his 1850 guidebook to North Wales Charles Cliffe went even further in this criticism: '*The once fortified summit of [the mountain] Carnedd Llewelyn has been unfortunately much altered by the Ordnance Surveyors*', with only part of a wall left standing to hint at some ancient structure.

Such challenges aside, there remains a location called *Cae Elen* (*Elen's Field*) just to the south west in the map on page 100. A farm site also called *Cae Elen* is shown on the 1901 (second edition) OS map and it is at the northern perimeter of RAF Valley airfield, which was constructed at the time of the Second World War. It was during the extension of a runway in this location in 1942 that over a hundred and fifty items of Celtic artefacts were discovered in the lake, *Llyn Cerrig Bach*. These major archaeological finds are believed to be votive offerings, deposited in the lake over the period from 300BC to 100AD by the Celtic people of Anglesey.

Today only the surviving place-names hint at us from the distant past, making verbal connections where nothing much remains on the archaeological surface strata. Even less remains of evidence for a place just north of Bodedern, the site being recorded as little more than cropmarks of an enclosure of unknown date. On the modern OS map of Anglesey it just says *Stryd y Facsen*, where there are a handful of scattered dwellings, located in the parish of *Llanfigael*. The OS map from 1889 marks here *Groeslon*, which means *Cross Lane*, and immediately to the east of this is Anglesey's main river, *Afon Alaw*. This river meanders its way through the nearby village of *Elim*, on the outskirts of which is the ancient site of *Bedd Branwen*, although little remains to be seen today, as shown opposite on page 102. It was believed to be the grave (Welsh *bedd*) of *Branwen*, a beautiful woman whose tragic tale is also told in the *Mabinogion*. The story tells of war between Wales and Ireland because of mistreatment of *Branwen* by her Irish husband, King *Matholwch*. *Branwen* was the sister of *Bran the Blessed*, a character who is reminiscent of the Fisher King in the Arthurian



stories, where Bran is identified as the guardian of the Holy Grail. Branwen's story in the *Mabinogion* involves a magic cauldron, which like the Grail itself has the power of resurrection.

In the Anglesey place-name *Stryd y Facsen* we again encounter the Welsh language mutation convention, the letter F of Facsen having mutated from M, thereby giving us the name Macsen. So here the translation would be 'Street of Macsen' and the *Mabinogion* story of the emperor's dream does, it will be recalled, involve street-building as part of the marriage deal with Elen and her father Eudaf.

The Old English word street has its origin in Latin to specifically indicate a hard-surfaced route, involving layering during construction: hence the Latin source word *strata* (plural; singular *stratum*). As illustrated on page 68, the layering of stones and gravel (aggregates) was called the *agger* by the Roman builders.

There are the well-known Roman roads (Latin *Viarum Strata*) of Britain like Watling Street, Ermine Street and so on, and as is evident the word street is used rather than road. The Anglo-Saxon word street itself is now so familiar and commonplace in the English language that it is frequently used interchangeably with the word road, without any regard for there being a significant difference in meaning, but that was not always the case. A street specifically referred to a paved route, in contrast to the many dirt tracks and byways throughout the landscape.

The presence of a Roman road has over the centuries given rise to many place-names in England that reflect this proximity, such as Stratford (Warwickshire and Northamptonshire), Stretton (Oxfordshire, Cheshire, Staffordshire and Cornwall) and Chester Le Street near Durham being but a few examples. Where these Roman streets forded rivers the place-name would be, for example, Stratford (street-ford), and in the case of the settlements springing up alongside them they would be street-towns, as contracted to names like Stretton or Stratton. When writing his *History of Manchester*, the Anglican clergyman John Whitaker (1735-1808) noted: 'Near the bridge of Barton [Lancashire] the Roman road has consigned the appellation of the streets or street-fields to four meadows.'<sup>12</sup> From such rural locations settlements sprang up that eventually became the villages, towns and cities of England.

This also happened in Wales and is believed to be expressed in the fairly common use of the word Ystrad – The Street. Properties and other places-names often incorporate the word, and one was noted by a group of antiquaries in the 1840s: 'From Bettws Garmon to Caernarvon it is believed that the Roman road ran nearly along the modern one, which goes in a direct line to the middle of the station at Segontium. Above Bettws is a farm called Ystrad, "The Street", connected no doubt with the old Roman road.'<sup>13</sup> In his *History of Denbigh* (1836) John Williams adds to this usage: 'All the Welsh ystradau [plural] are derived from the *viarum strata*; and hence we may infer that Afon Ystrad, Pont Ystrad, Plas Ustrad, etc., in the immediate vicinity of Denbigh, indicate the direction of the ancient Roman road across the Vale [of Clwyd], probably towards Mynydd-y-Gaer [The Mountain Fort] near Llanefydd'.

## Branwen's Grave?

It was in 1813 that a local farmer needed stones for repair work on a building and he removed the turf from a mound on his land. Eventually he uncovered 'a cist formed of coarse flags canted and covered over. On removing the lid, he found an urn placed with its mouth downwards, full of ashes and half-calcined fragments of bone'.

FROM *The Cambro-Briton* 1820





It appears that the Welsh word equivalent of street – stryd – is not historically frequent and, as in England, it seems to have retained its particularly Roman association in the more ancient topography. For example, the Welsh place-name Pen y Stryd is part of Sarn Helen on its course south of the fort Tomen y Mur, and with the word pen it gives us the translation of ‘Head of the Street’ in this elevated section of the route. When Richard Fenton explored Sarn Helen in 1816, he noted in his travel journal how *‘there was no other practicable line for the road to take from Pen y Street, a most decided piece of a true raised Roman Road, so as to go through the fords titled Helen, and take the course of the trackway bearing that name for some miles’*.

As with Stryd y Facsen, we also find in the same west Anglesey administrative division of Llifon another name incorporating the word stryd. Although the ancient church disappeared long ago, its name is recorded as Llanystydan, the translation in an 18th-century antiquarian journal being *‘the church of the pavement’*.<sup>14</sup> At first sight this may seem an odd interpretation, but the word *‘pavement’* once meant rather more than its current usage for the pedestrian walk-way at the side of a thoroughfare. It simply meant that the surface was paved or otherwise hard-surfaced, the word pavement having a Latin root to indicate that the material had been beaten or trodden down, and in this sense it relates to the *agger* of road construction employed by the Romans.

When an intrepid group of Victorian antiquaries were exploring Anglesey, they noted the remains of the Roman street near Elen’s old fort: *‘On regaining their carriages, the excursionists drove some distance along an old road curiously paved [passing] a little to the south of a Roman camp known as Caer Helen, and was, no doubt, one of the two Roman roads which met at Holyhead.’*<sup>15</sup> Other ‘excursionists’ were to find traces of Elen’s partner Macsen in the Taf Valley of South Wales: *‘a tower for defence and observation [...] Caer Facsen, to which the causeway joining the Roman road [...] where the Emperor Maximus (Macsen) had his camp.’*<sup>16</sup> The phrase *‘curiously paved’* illustrates how ‘pavement’ was used in its older sense in relation to the *agger* of a Roman road, just as we found the Welsh word stryd connected to Macsen at the eponymous Stryd y Facsen in Anglesey. It also illustrates how folk-memory has contributed to the survival of this important topographical information in Wales, without which the story of those 4th-century characters could be – and often is – dismissed as ‘mythological’, or worse still wholly fictitious. The *Mabinogion* theme of a dream leading to a love story may be fanciful in character, but within it lies a piece of Britain’s ancient history, albeit veiled in the obscurity of Time.

As to reference works describing Sarn Helen, there is little in the way of detailed historic records, as distinct from the odd mention in more general travel and history books, with several having been previously quoted. Sarn Helen is thoroughly examined in 20th-century books on the Roman roads of Britain, but its associations with folk-memory remain largely unexplored. Probably the earliest attempt at a comprehensive examination of its route was an 18-page pamphlet published in 1926,<sup>17</sup> followed in 1939 by a booklet extending to 45-pages,<sup>18</sup> and a considerably lengthier exploration appeared in 1992.<sup>19</sup> All three publications tend to focus on tracing its course through Wales, and they do provide useful guides for those intrepid walkers seeking a landscape experience following a Roman road.

It was the publication in 1998 of a book entitled *The Holy Kingdom*<sup>20</sup> that viewed Sarn Helen from a different perspective, seeking to give it an historic context, especially focusing on the route in relation to Arthurian studies. Bold pioneers in this field, Alan Wilson and Baram Blackett joined forces with best-selling author Adrian Gilbert to explore the ancient Welsh records and, more particularly, the actual landscapes of King Arthur and associated characters. The authors identify several potentially significant locations in the Nevern area of Pembrokeshire, including rivers like Afon Bannion (River of the Empress) and Afon Nyfer (Pure or Holy River), linking these on the map to a place called Constantinople. To very briefly summarise, they hypothesise that the True Cross of Helen (Constantine’s mother?) is concealed in a cave that has been the destination of pilgrimage for centuries, and that Helen spent her final years not in the Constantinople of the eastern Roman Empire, but rather that location in Pembrokeshire (Dyfed).

Once more we are left wondering which empress is the focus of attention here: Constantine’s mother



Helen, or Eudaf's daughter Elen. It is certainly possible that Elen had connections with South Wales, influencing place-name associations mentioned in *The Holy Kingdom*, and it may be that she ended her days in a southern Welsh kingdom. Helen, on the other hand, certainly did not perish in Britannia. Constantine the Great built a splendid mausoleum for his mother's body in Rome's Via Labicana, the building itself undergoing papal restorations in 625 and 858. Finally, in the 12th-century Pope Anastasius III had her body moved to beneath the altar under a marble cuppola at the Basilica of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli (St. Mary of the Altar of Heaven).

And that would have been Saint Helen's final resting place, but the plot thickens in the year 1095 when Abbot Notcher of the Abbey of Hautvillers, France organised a well-attended event on a promontory called Montiscola in October of that year. Many dignitaries and members of Europe's nobility turned up for the ceremony, including Adela the daughter of William the Conqueror. A large golden urn was produced, inscribed as follows: '*The body of St. Helena the queen mother of Constantine, saving the head*', which still remains to this day in a shrine at Trier in Germany. The researcher who translated the original medieval French account of this event observed that Abbot Notcher probably congratulated himself '*on the success of the pious fraud by which his convent arose to such reputation.*'<sup>21</sup>

Whether real or fakes, relics of Helen's remains ended up all over the place, and if all the relics were brought together she would have had a remarkably large number of limbs. Even Glastonbury Abbey had what was described as Helen's 'arm-bone', as recorded in the 14th-century. Needless to say, many miraculous occurrences have been attributed to these bits and pieces over the centuries. Helen's huge and now empty sarcophagus is presently in the Vatican Museum, and it is richly adorned with carvings. Several of the carved figures are depicted wearing the Phrygian Cap, and Mithras is usually portrayed in this headgear, a design feature that obviously appealed to Helen's son Constantine with his personal devotion to that mystery cult and *Sol Invictus*.

The relic of the True Cross has fascinated Christians since its 'invention', and no doubt it will continue to do so. This fascination draws pilgrims to undertake arduous journeys and in *The Holy Kingdom* the authors state that, '*Helen paraded the Cross around*' via Sarn Helen and that is how this particular Roman road acquired its name; no authority is cited for this assertion. The folk-memories surrounding Helen and Elen have led to a kind of collective adoption of a cultural 'personality' – rather than one particular individual. Like our personal libraries of memories, folk-memory is also subject to the effects of the passing years: the older one becomes the more conflated become the contents of our mental archives. In the socio-cultural consciousness of communities distant from our own time, religious belief systems dominated life in a Britain far removed from the largely secular one of today. The Age of Reason eventually dawned and the Age of Saints was finally swept under the carpet of the Reformation, along with the dusty relics of the past.

Originally, the instrument of torture and death, the cross was of relatively late adoption into the symbolism of Christianity, as illustrated by the writings of the early Christian theologian, Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215). He encouraged fellow churchmen to limit the design of symbolic devices contained in their regalia, suggesting that signet rings, for example, should portray '*a dove, or a fish, or a ship impelled by the breath of heaven*'.<sup>22</sup> When Christianity was literally an underground movement in the catacombs of Rome, symbolic expressions in the wall paintings there were limited to portrayals of the Good Shepherd and the like, although Clement, fearing the rise of idolatry, was rather dismissive of such visual representations generally. In his twelve-volume study of the key figures in early Christianity, the 19th-century Alban Butler observed the following about the late introduction of the cross symbol into religious iconography: '*The Cross could not be decently mentioned amongst Romans, who looked upon it as an unlucky omen*'.<sup>23</sup>

And well they might, given that it was a gruesome device for killing people in a slow and agonising manner. Precisely when the cross was adopted as the universal symbol for the new religion does not appear to be recorded, although Tertullian of Carthage observed in his book, *De Corona* of the year 204 that in his day followers of Jesus would repeatedly trace the sign of the cross on their foreheads. Constantine the Great



decreed against crucifixion as a form of capital punishment in 337, in deference to its most exalted victim.

Iconographic acceptability was an issue that rumbled on through the centuries. When the early church leaders gathered in Spain for the Council of Elvira at the beginning of the 300s, they were deeply concerned about imagery. So much so, that they ruled emphatically that no pictures should appear in churches. Here was an initial attempt to endorse Mosaic Law that prohibited 'graven images' and to avoid the inevitability of idolatrous worship. The issue erupted again into a confrontation in the 8th-century, recounted in the chronicle of John Capgrave (1393-1464). The Byzantine Emperor Constantine V (718-775) summoned a major council at *'which he commanded that all the images in the Church be pulled down, both of Christ and of our Lady, and other Saints'*.<sup>24</sup> This iconoclasm was to reach fever pitch with the much later Reformation, and it was to even take its toll on the *Welsh Cross*, an event to be recounted later in this book.

Eventually, of course, the cross was to become the dominant symbol to represent the Christian faith, and a fragment of the original was the ultimate relic. Around the year 568, the Byzantine Emperor Justin II (520-578) sent the Frankish Princess Radegund (c.520-586) a reliquary containing a fragment of the precious wood, which became the prized relic of the abbey she founded at Poitiers. Canonised in the 9th-century, Saint Radegund herself inevitably became the object of relic hunters, *'part of the vestments of St. Radegund'* being listed in the possession of Yorkshire's acquisitive Meaux Abbey. There was also an abbey dedicated to Saint Radegund in southern England, near Dover, and King Edward I is recorded as making an offering, or oblation there: *'June 14 1299, oblation of the king at the great altar in the church of the abbey of St. Radegund, seven shillings, and to the cross of Cnerth six shillings'*.<sup>25</sup>

The reference to the *'cross of Cnerth'* is actually to the *Welsh Cross* under one of its various scribal titles, but we shall examine this king's oblations in more detail when we come to explore the artefact's role in the hands of England's monarchs, after Edward I acquired it from Wales.

From the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 883 we learn that the pope sent King Alfred the Great a small portion of the *'Lignum Domini'* (Wood of the Lord), a relic that some accounts say the king then donated to Glastonbury Abbey's collection. Another member of the Wessex dynasty, Athelstan (c.894-939) also received a fragment from a king of the Franks and even one of the crucifixion nails, also said to have been discovered by Helen. This piece of the Holy Wood was eventually donated to Malmesbury Abbey.



Reliquaries like these were used to house the treasured remains of saints, the one above depicting the murder of Thomas Becket, whose body part it would once have contained.

COLLECTION Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.



PHOTO Keith Bruce.

COLLECTION National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.



Another holy relic which Athelstan gifted to this abbey was a thorn from the famous Crown of Thorns, of which no historical references appear until the early 400s, when the whole object was displayed in Jerusalem. Bits from it enjoyed a similarly esteemed status as the Holy Wood well into the Middle Ages, and one is noted in a Will dated the 31st of May 1356. Elizabeth, the widow of Sir Edmund Mortimer, specified that she should be buried in the church of the Friars Preachers in London, having bequeathed to this order '*a cross made of the wood of the very cross of our saviour [...] wherein was contained one of the thorns of his crown*'.<sup>26</sup>

It was at the celebrated abbey that the chronicler William of Malmesbury received his education, and he writes about these venerated fragments of the True Cross. Speaking of Sighelm, the Bishop of Sherborne returning from India – '*a matter of astonishment even in the present time*' – the chronicler says that the bishop brought back '*a present more precious than the finest gold, part of our Saviour's cross, sent by pope Marinus to the king*'. William's description of the reliquary impresses still: '*a diadem, precious from its quantity of gold, but more so for its jewels, the splendour of which threw the sparks of light so strongly on the beholders, that the more steadfastly any person endeavoured to gaze, so much the more was dazzled, and compelled to avert his eyes; part of the holy and adorable cross enclosed in crystal; where the eye, piercing through the substance of the stone, might discern the colour and size of the wood*'.<sup>27</sup> The use of transparent quartz or rock crystal was frequently applied to ornamental crosses, so as to magnify the invariably tiny fragments of the precious wood incorporated beneath. In a later chapter we shall examine more closely the actual construction of these objects, including the *Welsh Cross* itself.

A 19th-century writer on the subject of what he calls 'cruciana' recorded his observations of a rather unusual fragment in Germany: '*They have an extraordinary veneration for a piece of the cross, in the midst of which there is a hole that was made by one of the nails. They tell us, that heretofore, the emperors placed their greatest hopes of prosperity and success, both in peace and war; in this enlivening wood, with the nail and other relics that are kept in Nuremberg*'.<sup>28</sup> The mention in the quote of 'emperors' refers to those of the Holy Roman Empire, a papal-inspired confederation of European territories that sought to revive the long-gone Western Empire of Rome. It is from this period of the 800s that the fraudulent *Donation of Constantine* (see page 16) appears to date, fostering the emergence of the new initiative which lasted for many centuries, the leader often being referred to as the 'King of the Romans'.

There are further examples of how the leaders of church and state used these relics as a form of diplomatic currency, way beyond the value of mere coinage, with fragments of the cross becoming bargaining chips in Europe's negotiating stakes. King Sigurd of Norway received the gift of a 'splinter' of the True Cross in Jerusalem in 1110, having agreed to promote Christianity on his return to Scandinavia, while in 1360, after seemingly endless warfare between France and England, a peace treaty was concluded with a relic. Part of the concluding deal was that the English King Edward III received from the French, '*exceedingly precious relics of the most holy cross*'.<sup>29</sup> These relics were from the 13th-century Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, and they had previously been purchased by King Louis IX from Baldwin II of Constantinople around 1240. Baldwin was regularly strapped for cash, and he even handed over his only son as a pledge on a loan from Venetian merchants in the mid-1200s.

One of several monks who contributed to the *Flores Historiarum* chronicle, the 13th-century Roger of Wendover recounts, under the year 1223, how Baldwin II forgot to take with him his relics of the True Cross when he went into battle against the Saracens. Meanwhile back in Constantinople the emperor's chaplain – '*of English extraction*' – fled the city with some of Baldwin's relics and treasure. He eventually made his way to England where he went to St Alban's Abbey. A monk there purchased a couple of the items, including '*two fingers of Saint Margaret*', but declined to buy the relic of the True Cross that was being offered. Efforts to sell it at other monasteries also failed, until he came to Bromholm in Norfolk with the relic: '*two pieces of wood placed across one another, and almost as wide as the hand of a man*'.<sup>30</sup> Thereafter the Cross of Bromholm generated considerable income for its new custodians, achieving fame far and wide through its claimed miraculous powers. No doubt its provenance was kept quiet.





## Sainte-Chapelle Paris

The Sainte-Chapelle was built in the 1240s by King Louis IX to house his recently acquired and large collection of relics.

The French king handed over the money to Venetian merchants, with whom Baldwin II of Constantinople had pawned the relics to raise funds.

Illustrations from Morand's *History of Sainte-Chapelle*, 1790.



Like other nobles and ecclesiastical foundations, King Henry III was an enthusiastic collector of relics. On the 3rd of April 1265 Henry is recorded as making an oblation of five shillings to the precious wood in his possession. When this king had visited Paris and Saint-Chapelle, this magnificent shrine had made a deep impression on him. There survives in the French National Archives a satirical poem, which illustrates Henry's rather covetous view of the splendid building and its abundance of highly desirable relics:

*By the five wounds of God I swear,  
That at Paris, that very great city,  
There's a chapel so choice and rare,  
I'll have it rolled off in a cart  
To my Abbey in London afar,  
There set it up just as it stands.<sup>31</sup>*

Unfortunately for our present study, no really definitive records are known of how and when the relic of the *Welsh Cross* found its way into the royal treasures of Gwynedd; leaving aside the Saint Neot story-line questioned in this book's Introduction. Perhaps it had been amongst the cherished possessions of the patron saint of Wales, David (Welsh *Dewi Sant*), who flourished in the 6th-century: *'It was confidently stated that the gifts which St. David had received from the patriarch of Jerusalem were preserved at Llangyfelach'*.<sup>32</sup> This village near Swansea, South Wales can no longer offer pilgrims the chance to reach out to whatever those 'gifts' were from the Holy Land, and it is by no means certain that a piece of the True Cross would have been among the objects.

One visitor to Constantinople, the 7th-century Frankish Bishop Arculf, described his pilgrimage to the Holy Land to the abbot of Iona's monastery, Adamnan (679-704), who recorded the details for posterity in what became known in Latin as *De Locis Sanctis*. As well as describing the holy places themselves, brief mention of the True Cross relics is made and Arculf describes how three pieces of the cross are kept in a chest. This is placed on a golden altar three times each year for veneration by the emperor of Constantinople and others during particular festivals. For the benefit of those unable to make the pilgrimage, or acquire a cross fragment for themselves, the book was copied and circulated for religious contemplation. Such was the requirement of the Northumbrian King Aldfrith (died c.704), who ordered a copy for his personal use in Christian meditation.

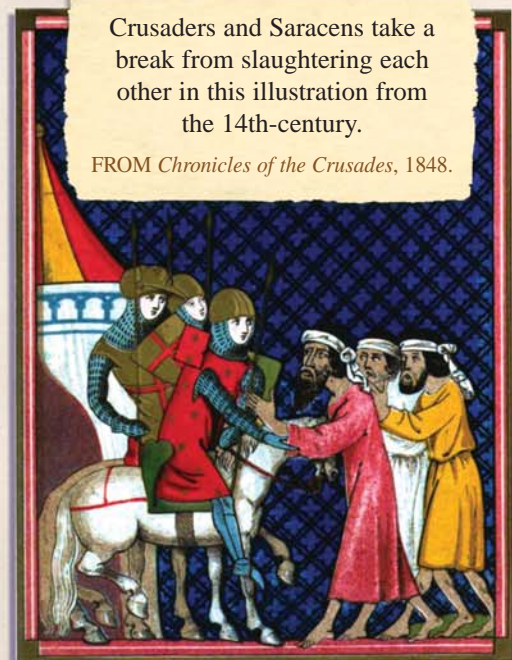


As in the days of the east-west division of the Roman Empire, relations between the two capital cities could be sensitive, if not downright fraught, and things were coming to a head with the First Crusade. It started with an appeal from Constantinople in the 1090s for assistance in stemming the tide of Islam, whose warriors were becoming too close for comfort in the Byzantine areas of what is now Turkey. The west responded in 1095 with a papal summons throughout Christendom to 'take up the cross', with the usual remission of sins for participants. Nobility and peasants alike set off in their thousands, some with the best of intentions, others simply intent on seizing the bounty that war could provide. Pilgrimage, pillage and profit tended to go hand-in-hand throughout the crusading church's corporate affairs. Jerusalem was finally taken in 1099 and Europe's elite carved up the Middle East into the Crusader States, much to the dismay of Emperor Alexios I who had expected the lost lands of his Byzantine Empire to be returned. When the leaders of the First Crusade had passed through Constantinople in 1097, Alexios had them swear on the True Cross and the Crown of Thorns that they would not keep for themselves any reconquered Byzantine territory. Alexios was to be disappointed as some crusaders had double-standards when it came to holy war and oath-swearing on relics.

A second, largely unsuccessful crusade got underway in the 1140s, with a third in 1189 to attempt a reconquest of Jerusalem, now in the hands of the armies of Saladin (c.1137-1193), although it ultimately failed in that goal. The year before the Third Crusade got underway, 1188, the Archbishop of Canterbury, another Baldwin, was travelling through Wales, calling for people to take up the cross and journey to the Holy Land. He was accompanied on this recruitment drive by the Archdeacon of Brecon, Gerald (Latin – *Giraldus Cambrensis*), the part-Welsh son of the Norman knight William de Barri. Gerald's diary-like account of the journey was to provide a rare glimpse – albeit often fanciful – of Wales and the Welsh in that period. His *Journey Through Wales* comments on the Welsh reverence for relics: 'We observe that they show a greater respect than other nations to churches and ecclesiastical persons, to the relics of saints, bells, holy books, and the cross, which they devoutly revere'.<sup>33</sup>

One of these 'ecclesiastical persons', the previously mentioned Welsh priest Adam of Usk probably formed a rather different view than Gerald when travelling with pilgrims across France: 'While I was sleeping, I was clean stripped, at least on the second time, even by my breeches, by certain Welshmen in whom I had placed my trust'.<sup>34</sup> How effective Archbishop Baldwin and Gerald were in encouraging Welsh crusaders remains to be seen, although a book from 1730 suggests a successful recruitment mission: 'This journey did Richard I undertake, and had with him out of Wales 3000 men, by Baldwin's travels'.<sup>35</sup> The entry for 1188 in the medieval *Welsh Chronicle of the Princes* (*Brut y Tywysogion*) records how the forces of Islam 'came to Jerusalem, took possession of the Cross, on Ash Wednesday, and subdued Jerusalem; and of as many Christians they found therein, they killed some, and took the others into captivity. And on that account Phillip, King of France, and Henry, King of England, and Baldwin, Archbishop of Canterbury, with an innumerable host of Christians, took upon them the signs of the cross of Christ'.<sup>36</sup>

Sixteen years later, in 1204, Constantinople itself was to be sacked by 'fellow Christians' from the Rome-inspired west in what became known as the Fourth Crusade, a stain on Christendom that cannot be eradicated. Nothing and no one was spared: nuns were raped and churches burnt, along with libraries containing irreplaceable ancient documents. The shameful looting of Constantinople by the crusaders ravaged the city, with cartloads of treasure and precious relics being stolen from the ancient capital founded by





## Brut y Tywysogion

109

**G**yynn a y deheren brenhined y saellon.  
 wedi daruot yz anodun vall dyuhestu  
 luf ar newyn gynt a dywepwyt uchot.  
 yn oes catvaladyz vendigeit: y doeth y saellon  
 a gozeigyn lloegyz or mor pwy gild. ay thynal  
 a dan pynp brenhin. val ybnasser gynt yn oes  
 hord a hengist pau deholassant Gortheyn gorth  
 eueu o deruynen lloegyz. ac ay rannassant yn py  
 nup ran rhyngthunt. Ac yna y symvassant hen  
 weu y dinesyd. ar tref. ar rannuroed. ar cantref  
 oed. ar llwydeu. ar ardal oed: herwyd ev yert hwynt  
 ebun. London y galwassant caer llud. Ewric  
 neu forch y galwassant caer effrauc. ac val hyn  
 ny holl dinesyd lloegyz a symvassant ev hen  
 weu. or rei yd arnerwyt yz hynny hys ledilb ona  
 dunt. hynny y galweint cantref. hynny y gal  
 went dydd. Ac y dwyn ar gof yz ued a telei rat  
 llud: yz arwyd dwilodrus ysgymru. a un rhyng  
 thunt pau lannant holl deledogeon hys byde  
 yu ar vynydd ambu. sef oed hynny dralweth low  
 re sefres. Ac an hynny y galwassant y rannuroed  
 west ffer. est ffer. horth ffer. yz hynny hys ledilb.  
 Allynna val y rannassant lloegyz y rhyngthunt  
 y brenhin hert holl llwyd geint a dan ycheryn  
 nev. yu esgolot a oed yny gynnoeth. nys aingen  
 archetob hert. ac esgolb caer rhy. y brenhin  
 west ffer y doeth wykeffire. harrot ffer. horth ffer.  
 llwydant ffer. deruyn ffer. a chornwale. a phym  
 esgolot a oed yny gynnoeth. nys aingen. esgol

Symut h  
 y dinesyd  
 trefi

Erchin  
 B. We

Chronicle of the Princes



Constantine the Great. There were even claims that his mother's remains had been removed from her tomb in Constantinople (*also* in Rome!) and transported to Venice, as recorded in the *Travels* of Bertrandon de la Broquiere of 1433. It would appear that Saint Helen's remains were never destined to rest in peace – nor even in one piece – in a single place.

A contemporary chronicler from the Champagne region of France, Geoffry de Villehardouin, was present at the assault on Constantinople and recorded a first-hand account. The Bishop of Troyes – also in Champagne – had been appointed guardian of the holy relics, although his guardianship had a strong element of self-interest: '*this office enabled him to gratify his church of Troyes with some of the most exquisite morsels of devotion*'. The chronicler went on to note that, '*other pilgrims, who were scattered over the city, gained incalculable plunder*', observing, '*of holy reliques, I need only say that it contained more than all Christendom combined*'.<sup>37</sup> Not for long it would seem.

Another eye-witness of these events in Constantinople was the French knight Robert de Clari, whose chronicle provides many details of the treasure and relics found in the sacked city. In what is an extremely rare piece of information about dimensions of True Cross relics, Robert describes entering the '*Palace of the Lion's Mouth*'. In one of its many chapels were found '*two pieces of the True Cross, as thick as a man's leg and a fathom [i.e. 6 feet/1.83 meters] in length*.'<sup>38</sup> No doubt these unusually large objects were carved up and shared amongst the conquering nobility of Western Europe, since no records survive recalling relics of such great proportions. Leaving aside any potential for exaggeration by the chronicler, and given that they were found in Constantinople, we may reasonably conclude that Helen had this comparatively huge quantity shipped from the Holy Land to her son's city at the time of her discovery of them in Jerusalem.

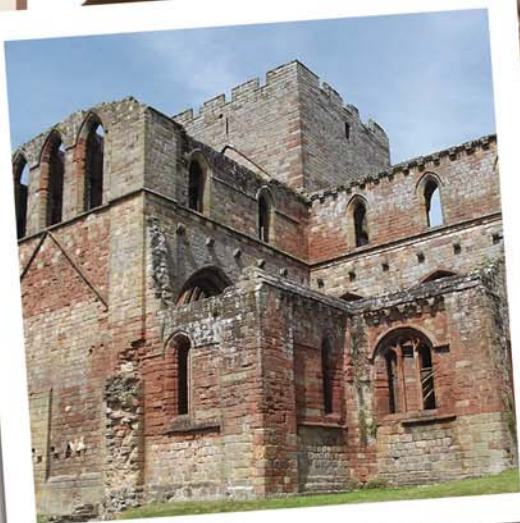
It was from this devastating 'crusade' that countless looted relics found their way to western Europe, as a recent study of Byzantine history noted: '*reliquaries of the True Cross brought to the West following the sack of Constantinople in 1204 include those now at Limburg ab der Lahn [Hesse, Germany] and San Marco, Venice, as well as the Fleschi-Morgan reliquary in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*'.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps amongst them was the portion of the True Cross that somehow ended up with the royal family of Gwynedd, becoming the *Welsh Cross* of recorded history. The sale of relics was then widespread throughout the Middle East and Europe, reaching such proportions that Pope Innocent III forbade the sale of relics during his papacy from 1198 to 1216. His efforts were unlikely to have had any effect on the lucrative trade, which by the 1200s had reached the heights of absurdity. A French town was claiming to have the navel of Jesus, but so too was Rome, and a third holy navel was putting in an appearance elsewhere!

A possible explanation for how a ruler of Gwynedd, Llywelyn ap Gruffydd (c.1223-1282) possessed a piece of the True Cross lies in yet another crusade to the Holy Land. There was the usual call to arms from Rome, with the familiar spiritual inducements like papal indulgences. An added bonus was that even people who did not actually travel, but rather facilitated crusaders with money and ships could look forward to heavenly blessings. Possibly only in his late teens at the time, Llywelyn ap Gruffydd joined with Richard (1209-1272), first Earl of Cornwall, and embarked for the Holy Land in 1240, as very briefly recorded in the medieval *Chronicle of Lanercost*.<sup>40</sup> It became known as the Barons' Crusade.

In 1225 Richard, the second son of King John, had been given Cornwall as a birthday present by his brother King Henry III, and he built Tintagel Castle in the 1230s on the legendary site associated with King Arthur; at least according to the chronicler of the previous century, Geoffrey of Monmouth. The young, evidently well-connected Llywelyn enhanced his military skills that were to stand him in good stead in later life, as we shall see in the next chapter when we explore the final dynasty to rule the kingdom of Gwynedd. Llywelyn's son Dafydd is recorded as visiting Tintagel Castle in Polwhele's *History of Cornwall*: '*Here Richard King of the Romans entertained his nephew David [Dafydd] Prince of Wales*.'

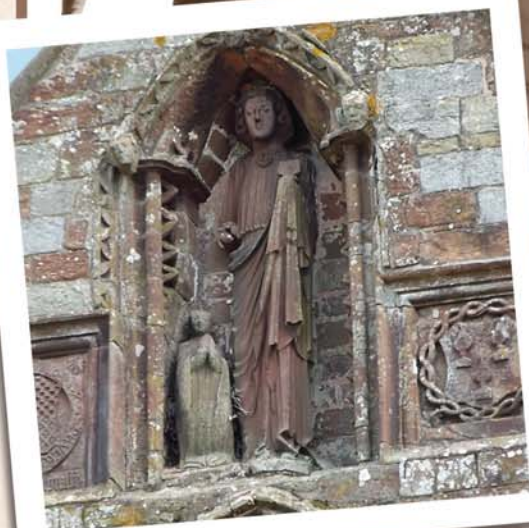
King Henry himself had a fairly typical attitude to crusading. On the face of it, the reason was to free the Holy Land from 'heathen' control, but the prevailing sub-text is often apparent, as revealed in one of his letters seeking a profitable alliance with the king of Castile. This small kingdom was adjacent to the Muslim





## Lanercost Priory

Lanercost Priory in Cumbria was founded around 1169 by the Augustinian Order, and some of the masonry used was taken from the nearby Hadrian's Wall. The English King Edward I stayed at Lanercost on several occasions during his wars against the Scots. On the feast day of Mary Magdalene in 1298, Edward defeated William Wallace at the Battle of Falkirk. The king presented the priory with a statue of Mary Magdalene (below left). Again on his way to fight the Scots in 1306, Edward was taken ill and stayed at the priory for six months, shortly before his death in Cumbria. A window (below right) designed by Christine Boyce in 2006, records Edward's final stay at this priory, source of the great chronicle.



The  
Chronicle  
of  
Lanercost





dominated Iberian Peninsula, forming what is now Spain and Portugal. After a lengthy preamble in his letter of 1256, King Henry came to the point: '*And we will do our best with our lord the pope to turn the crusaders towards the parts of Africa or Morocco. And if we shall be able to effect this by our own means, or the said king of Castile, by his own agency or that of others, we will go with our army to the aforesaid parts, namely, whither we are bound to go, to the parts of Jerusalem, in the company of the said king of Castile*'. Mindful of the ever-tempting prospect of war booty and territory, Henry suggests that, '*whatsoever we shall get together in the aforesaid countries, we will divide equally between us*'.<sup>41</sup>

From a major study<sup>42</sup> published in 2011 of the involvement of Wales in the various crusades, we learn that Llywelyn ap Gruffydd's journey lasted little more than a year or so. This is a surprisingly short period given the travelling involved. When Llywelyn returned from crusade, he like other nobles of Europe may have brought home a relic of the True Cross from the Middle East. It is equally possible that another member of the royal house of Gwynedd had acquired the relic earlier, and that it had remained amongst their treasures in North Wales for centuries. It may even have survived from the Arthurian period, since the crown of King Arthur makes an appearance in the account of Gwynedd's royal treasures later in this book.

Be that as it may, on referring again to the *Chronicle of Lanercost* we find the following rare description of the *Welsh Cross*, Gwynedd's sacred relic: '*A most beautiful piece of the Holy Cross, carved into a portable cross [...] which it is said, Helena kept after the Invention as a special portion, and brought with her when she returned to Britain with her husband*'.<sup>43</sup> From this unique statement made by a medieval writer at Lanercost Priory in Cumbria, we are confronted with the possibility that this particular relic had remained in Britain for centuries. If, as the chronicler says, it was Helen's own personal portion, then clearly it was a very special artefact indeed. But where had it been for nearly a thousand years between Helen's discovery in the Holy Land and its appearance in the possession of a 13th-century Welsh ruler?

As can easily happen with medieval chroniclers, things can get muddled. The '*husband*' referred to is, presumably, Constantius, who died in York in 306, and Helen's discovery of the True Cross in Jerusalem is generally dated to the 320s. So, while she may have '*returned to Britain*' with the relic, she could not have done so with the late Constantius. Was the Lanercost chronicler simply transcribing some other garbled account – as was sometimes the case – or did he hear a story that then became confused? Could it be that what the writer heard was some tale of the other empress, Elen Luyddog, and her husband Magnus Maximus, plus a large relic of the True Cross? It is certainly not inconceivable that this particular imperial couple travelled to Britain from Gaul, and probably on several occasions given Elen's family ties in this Roman province. And not to mention the fact that Magnus undertook military service in Britannia, so he certainly was there and it would not be unusual for his partner to accompany him. It was, after all, just a trip across the English Channel, then hugging the British coast the vessel could have reached the settlement at Segontium in just a couple of days. Unlike Roman stations in North Wales such as Tomen y Mur, Segontium remained garrisoned and active up until the Romans finally abandoned Britain around the year 400.

If those who assert that Saint Helen of Constantinople never set foot in Britain are correct in that assertion, then it would beg the question how did her own piece of the True Cross end up there? It must all revolve around the issue of conflation with Saint Elen of Caernarfon. As considered on page 60, the *Vita Sancti Martini* by Sulpicius Severus is the Latin biography of Saint Martin, Bishop of Tours, who in an earlier role was a member of the Roman army, before falling under the influence of Saint Hilary of Poitiers. Saint Martin is recorded as having had regular contact with the devout wife of Emperor Magnus Maximus/Macsen Wledig while in Gaul at Trier, this emperor's imperial capital at the time. The empress even prepared a banquet for Martin and enjoyed spiritually edifying conversations with him. Unfortunately, her Christian name was not recorded in the biography, and yet the *Mabinogion* and other Welsh sources tell us that it was Elen.

Are we to dismiss the *Mabinogion* as non-historic because it is too fantastic in content? Does the fact that it was written in Welsh rather than Latin influence perceptions of credibility? This last question is



‘answered’ in a rambling book on Saint Martin by a Victorian doctor of divinity, John Gibson Cazenove, whose romano-centric bias is blatantly obvious when he is comparing sources of information on Magnus Maximus in his book’s preface: *‘If any of my readers are induced to compare the two portraits [Sulpicius Severus and the Mabinogion], they may perhaps be inclined to think that of the Latin historians the more probable’*.<sup>44</sup> As was customary, the early literary accounts of saints’ lives (hagiographies) are bulging at the seams with the miraculous and the incredible, and yet these are somehow ‘more probable’ to a thoroughly anglo-centric mind, romanised to the point of being intellectually myopic and culturally blinkered.

This is all rather symptomatic of the cultural neglect which Welsh-language historic sources had experienced for far too long. Was it simply a case of a ‘language barrier’ that limited the wider dissemination of these texts to the intellectual community of scholarship? The Welsh antiquary Evan Evans, writing in the 18th-century, wondered along these lines: *‘Whether the antient British language [early Welsh] can be so far recovered as to understand the most antient British writings now extant, is, I think, a consideration by no means beneath the notice of the Society of Antiquaries, and of all learned men in general’*.<sup>45</sup> It was Reverend Evans who gathered together a collection of old Welsh poetry and made available what were described as *‘the remains of the bards’* in 1764, helping to usher in a growing awareness of this fertile literary heritage.

From a recent study covering the relevant time-frame in Gaul, we learn that Saint Martin was responsible for *‘dominating the cult of the True Cross at Tours’*.<sup>46</sup> If we may presume that the bereaved Elen returned home to Gwynedd, following the murder of her husband in 388, then it is circumstantially possible that she brought with her the *Welsh Cross* relic on that occasion; perhaps a gift from Saint Martin to whom the empress was evidently devoted. There are no actual records of where she ended up. Maybe she returned to Segontium, where the church was dedicated to her son Peblig, who may also have fled Trier and the wrath of Emperor Theodosius the Great. As a mother with father-less children, Elen would naturally seek to protect herself and her family members.

For Elen to have acquired the status of ‘sainthood’ clearly shows that she was a spiritually significant individual in the eyes of her contemporaries. But what did this British woman do that elevated her to ‘sainthood’? It has to be remembered that the Celtic definition of ‘saint’ differed greatly from that of the Romano-centric school of thought, with its focus on martyrdom and the historically pervasive influence of a misogynistic mind-set. In his lecture on Celtic sainthood at Caernarfon in 1894, Professor Willis-Bund stressed that *‘barely two percent of the number of Welsh saints’* were martyred. He also noted a sharp distinction in the application of the word saint: *‘In Latin writers, if a saint be spoken of, he is never mentioned without the addition of the term saint. If we find the term used in the early Welsh manuscripts, it is, as a rule, a certain mark of a Latin transcriber, if not of a Latin author’*. The early Celtic ‘saints’ of Wales were not only noted for their piety but more particularly as teachers, within the simple religious communities that they gathered around themselves, hence the localised popularity of individual Celtic saints in Wales. This is evident in the case of Elen in the old kingdom of Gwynedd, which included Anglesey.

A significant point that Willis-Bund drew particular attention to is one that may well relate to the issues surrounding a ‘Saint Gwyddelan’ that we considered in the previous chapter, especially in relation to the village church’s dedication in the Conwy Valley: *‘Probably one of the most extraordinary instances of the result of the influence of the Latin Church on Welsh hagiology is to be found in the way the Latin Church incorporated into the number of Welsh Saints persons who either never existed, or, if they did, had no connection with Wales’*.<sup>47</sup> Like a ‘Little Irishman’ for example?

Elen is said to have introduced into Roman Britannia the Celtic form of monasticism from Gaul, and her cult in Gwynedd – along with that of Saint Peblig – obviously lasted for many centuries, judging by the abundance of topographical evidence alone. Another son, Cystennin (Constantine) is celebrated at the church in the Conwy area, once part of the kingdom of Gwynedd. Elen’s father Eudaf is said to have retired from worldly affairs and adopted a monastic life. Clearly, they were a holy family, but relatively little is known about them individually. Could it be that the tomb that King Edward I showed such interest in was actually that of



this Constantine, son of the Emperor Magnus Maximus and Elen? When Nennius wrote his work it was some four hundred years after the approximate date of the tomb, by which time any inscription would be very weathered and barely legible, and an additional four hundred years later when King Edward was quarrying his way through Segontium.

The *Chronicle of Lanercost* stated that the large relic in the *Welsh Cross* once belonged to the empress herself. The question remains: which empress? As we know, both had similar names and both lived in very broadly the same time-frame. If it was Elen's precious relic – rather than Helen's – then we have a link with the royal dynasty of Gwynedd, which is said to have been founded by Cunedda (meaning 'good hound') in the 400s. Cunedda's grandfather was Padarn Beisrudd ap Tegid, a name which translates as Paternus of the Scarlet Robe, son of Tegid. He is described as a senior figure in the Roman army of Britain under Magnus Maximus, and he was possibly a British chieftain who was granted military rank by the same emperor. Either way it illustrates the emphatic Gwynedd connection with that of the imperial Macsen of the *Mabinogion* story. Padarn also appears in the Arthurian corpus, his scarlet robe being one of the '*Thirteen Treasures of the Island of Britain*'. The garment was claimed to fit a brave man perfectly, but would never fit a coward. King Arthur is said to have attempted to steal this robe, which, along with the other twelve magical items was concealed by Merlin in the '*Glass House*' (Welsh *Ty Gwydr*), there to remain forever.

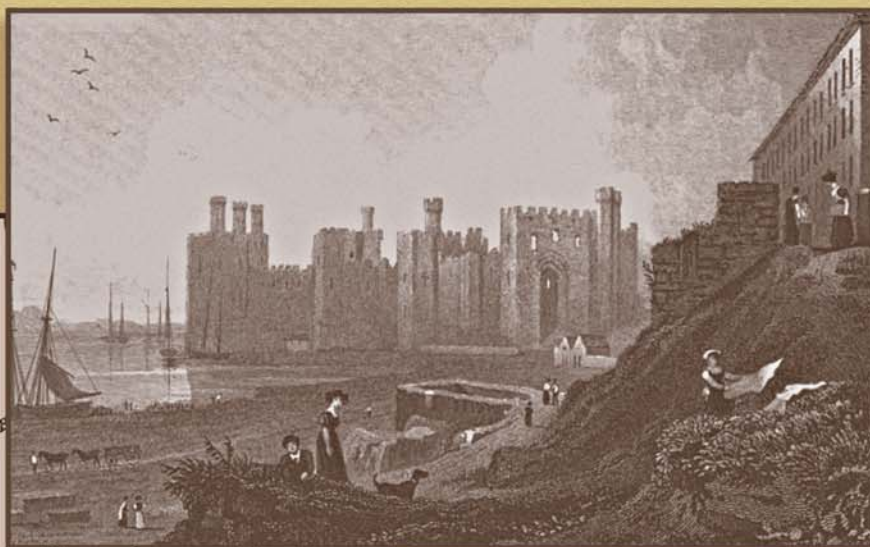
Cunedda is further credited with Roman connections, since for three generations before him his ancestors also bore Roman names. Cunedda's wife is claimed to have been Gwawl, daughter of Coel Hen the ruler of Rheged, a kingdom comprising the present northern England and southern Scotland. As well as an abundance of sons, they also had a daughter named 'Helena' – another Elen of Britannia? Here the genealogies become confusing and conflation seems to raise its ugly head once more. Elen Luyddog is said to have been the daughter of Eudaf Hen, the Segontium-based ruler. Gwynedd's dynastic founder Cunedda migrated from northern Britain and drove out the Irish, who had settled in the coastal regions of what is now North Wales. This whole saga was unfolding in the late 300s, when Magnus Maximus was running things in the British province, so it suggests that Cunedda's forces were *foederati* operating under the usurping emperor. The 'Helena' may be conflated with Elen Luyddog and her father Eudaf has been masked under the name of Coel Hen – *perhaps*.

Once more we should burden the shoulders of Geoffrey of Monmouth with responsibility for the reinvention of history, although Henry of Huntingdon should carry some of the blame. It just remained for the centuries to roll by and erode and corrupt folk-memory, reinforcing what is borderline fiction. In the absence of documentary reminders, by the time we get to medieval monks writing Latin chronicles in England the vagueness is well and truly entrenched. And we should also bear in mind how Emperor Magnus Maximus was subjected to eradication from 'official memory' by his imperial successors. It was a spiteful action that evidently succeeded to a frustrating extent for the modern researcher.

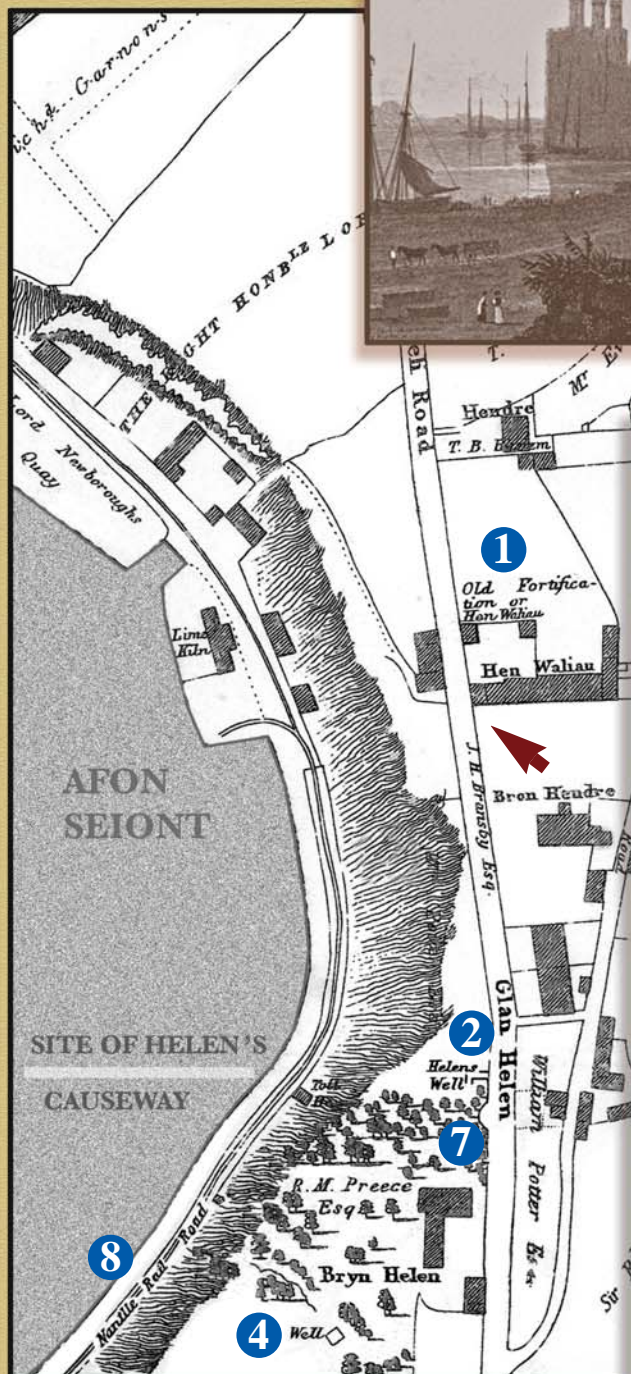
By the time we reach the 19th-century, all manner of vague literary conflations have evolved, and we find Victorians like the Reverend Thomas Smart making statements like this: '*The "Croes Enych" [the Welsh Cross], a portion of the cross sent by the Empress Helen to her brother Llewelyn, ap Coel, and on which, with the Gospel of S. John, the Cambrian [i.e. the Welsh] kings were sworn at their coronation*'.<sup>48</sup> Helen or Elen? An equally relevant question would be to enquire as to where Reverend Smart acquired this information. Unfortunately, it appears that Anglo-Normanophiles were not alone in enhancing their 'histories'. Smart's source may be nothing more than fabricated 'Welsh Triads' from the highly inventive pen of Edward Williams (1747-1826), a Welshman who called himself Iolo Morganwg. Along with some other antiquaries he produced 'old' Welsh literature for an eager, and it transpires credulous readership. These literary forgeries were hugely influential, especially in the 19th-century, and even in the 20th-century some of Iolo's 'tamperings' with Welsh texts are more widely known than the original material. Modern scholarship has exposed the extent of this quite extraordinary enterprise in manipulating a cultural heritage, all of which amounts to an example of well-intentioned literary fraud. Iolo probably imagined it to be a 'victim-less crime'.



RIGHT Engraving of a view of Caernarfon Castle by Henry Gastineau (1791-1876), showing the banks of the river before major redevelopment.

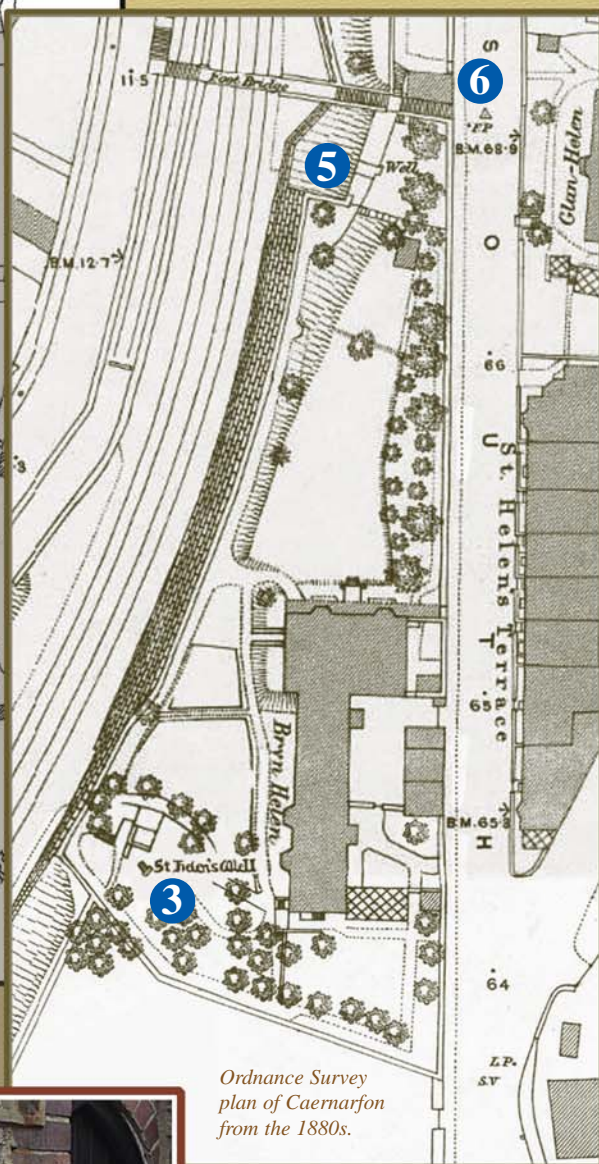


Viewpoint shown on plan below left by ➔



ABOVE A detail from a plan of Caernarfon by Hugh Humphreys, dating from 1848.

FAR RIGHT Detail of the Bryn Helen site from the OS plan 1880s.



Ordnance Survey plan of Caernarfon from the 1880s.



SEE MAIN TEXT FOR NUMERALS.



Like her son Peblig, Elen herself would certainly have merited a church devoted to her close to Segontium, and so we may suppose the small chapel by the river's edge dated to her time, although there is no information on its origin, let alone detailed descriptions. We can say with certainty that it stood near the banks of the River Seiont and still existed in the 1600s, although its overall condition by that time is not known. The much-travelled cleric and botanist John Ray (1628-1705) noted the following when he was collecting plant specimens in the area: '*Near Carnarvon remain still some ruins of an old town, which the Welsh call Caer-Segon, i.e. Segontium of the ancients; there is a little chapel, with a well close by it, dedicated both to St. Elyn, as is also the river fast by, called the Saint's River*'.<sup>49</sup> By the time Thomas Pennant was touring North Wales about a hundred years later, Elen's chapel had been reduced to '*some very slight remains of ruins*'.<sup>50</sup> Such descriptions echo the observations of John Leyland, when he described Hen Waliau as '*falling into the river*' by the 1550s.

In 1848 the Caernarfon-based printer Hugh Humphreys (1817-1896) published a town plan, and the relevant detail of this is reproduced on page 115 opposite, indicating what little remained of these Roman structures, described as '*Old Fortification or Hen Waliau*' on the plan – marked (1). The remains of a tower may be the square structure seen in the centre foreground of the engraving of a view by Henry Gastineau (1791-1876), with further masonry ruins seen on the right of that image, both being perilously close to the river's embankment, just as Leyland had observed centuries earlier. Gastineau's approximate viewpoint is marked on the Humphreys' plan by a blue arrowhead for orientation reference. This engraving appears to be the earliest representation of what little remained of Hen Waliau before the area's redevelopment, prompted by Caernarfon's commercial expansion. Although from the Humphreys' plan the Roman port fortifications appear well above the coastal high-tide point, it should be borne in mind that other structures that were once part of this complex would have been closer to the water's edge, so as to enable the unloading of ship-borne supplies destined for Segontium. Any remains would have been lost due to the much wider railway network.

If we travel a short distance down the road (today's A487) on Humphreys' plan, we arrive at the stretch marked as '*Glan Helen*' (i.e. 'Elen's Glen'), and '*Helens Well*' (2) is also marked nearby. However, Humphreys' plan presents some uncertainty when compared with the Ordnance Survey plan from the 1880s of the same site, showing the well's location (3) close to the edge of the railway embankment on the Bryn Helen property, a still extant Regency-style villa built by the Preece family in the early 1800s. The OS cartographers used a gothic-style typeface to indicate an ancient site. Humphreys simply marks this spot as '*Well*' (4) on his plan, and just to complicate things further another well (5) is marked on the OS plan much closer to Humphreys' siting of his location for '*Helens Well*' (2). Given that Humphreys was Caernarfon 'born-and-bred' it seems unlikely he would have got it wrong, especially since the well itself remained a popular venue in his day by those seeking help from the saint to cure their ills. Equally persuasive is the fact that the OS surveyors were *usually* thorough in their cartographic output, despite the criticisms of some Welsh antiquaries. In all probability the OS surveyors drew upon the local knowledge and property deeds of the family living at Bryn Helen, so as to arrive at the conclusion of where the well was actually located. This apparent anomaly requires further investigation.

Where Humphreys has placed the words '*Helens Well*' there is an L-shaped marking among the lettering, suggesting perhaps a few masonry footings of the ancient walls of the chapel, which was certainly derelict by Humphreys' survey of the 1840s – the '*slight remains*' Pennant recorded in the previous century? On the other hand, the OS plan of the 1880s shows a small rectangular building (6), adjacent to the new footbridge going over the railway lines. The photograph on page 117 shows the steps leading down to this footbridge and also the derelict structure. Both structures on each of the two plans appear to be in the same location. From another photograph on that page we can see that the wall fronting the road at this point has been closed-up with masonry, an arch being just visible among the overgrown vegetation. The brickwork is certainly not from the Roman period, but what this structure was is currently unknown. It is unlikely, therefore, to have any contemporaneous connection with the ancient chapel building itself.





LEFT A 19th-century lithograph by George Childs, from a drawing by Hugh Hughes, shows the slate quays constructed in response to Caernarfon's growing mercantile trade.

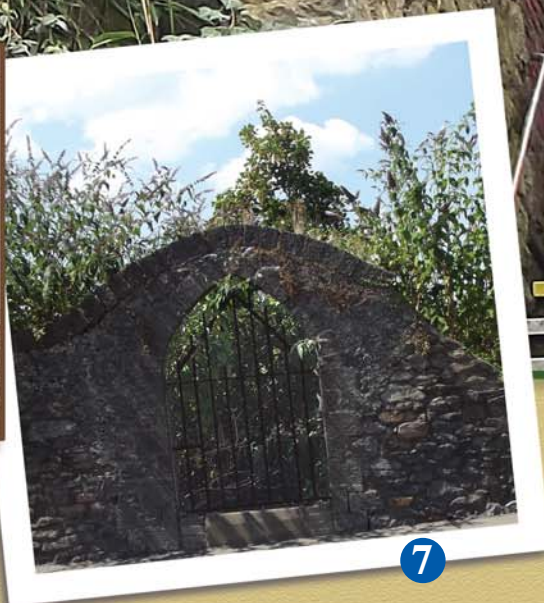
RIGHT The ruins of a derelict building (6) next to the steps (seen far right) leading to the footbridge across the railway lines.



ABOVE A detail from the 1880s Ordnance Survey plan showing the footbridge and also another well (5)  
BELOW RIGHT A photograph of the now sealed entrance (7).



LEFT This detail shows how the tower on the summit of Coed Helen appeared in the early 1700s, shown on the far left in Daniel Lerpiniere's romantic view above of the castle and nearby landscape.





The nearby small curve in the roadside boundary wall on Humphreys' plan is probably the arched feature (7) shown in that photograph, an entrance of unknown date that is now sealed with a fixed iron gate. Which of the two wells was actually Helen's Well (Welsh *Ffynon Elen*) remains something of a conundrum, given the seeming disparity between these cartographic sources.

There are several possibilities to account for the final disappearance of Elen's Chapel, which seems to have stood near to the long-lost Roman bridge across the Seiont, known as Helen's Causeway and added to the Humphreys' plan for reference purposes. One possibility would be its demise during the construction of the new road (A487), leading to the town of Pwllheli through Glan Helen, while another could be the chapel's remaining masonry was used by the landowner in the construction of the Bryn Helen villa. Thomas Roscoe's comment about the chapel being '*among the wrecks of time*' and '*not readily observed*'<sup>51</sup> makes it abundantly clear that there was not much left of the chapel building when he visited in the 1830s.

Another possible explanation for the chapel's demise may stem from the rise in Caernarfon's important role in exporting Welsh slate and copper. A narrow-gauge rail was constructed for delivery to the port's quayside, which is illustrated opposite in the lithograph by George Childs (1826-1873) from a drawing by Hugh Hughes (1790-1863). Marked on Humphreys' plan as the '*Nantlle Rail Road*' (8), it originally consisted of horse-drawn wagons carrying the slate from the quarries some ten miles away, as seen in the lower-left of Gastineau's picture from the 1830s. As the trade increased and the major slate quarries at Llanberis expanded, the existing slow route was replaced by locomotive rails, opened in the 1860s, and comparison between the two 19th-century plans shows how substantial this rail development was in encroaching further inland. This led to the removal of much of the earth embankment along this coastal stretch, replaced by the massive retaining walls that we see there today and pictured below, with the Bryn Helen property visible at the top above the only remaining railway line.

Elen's Chapel was no more to be seen in this busy port, where once an 18th-century rural idyll appeared, portrayed opposite in an engraving by Daniel Lerpiniere (1745-1835) from a drawing by Moses Griffith (1749-1819). The tower on the summit of Coed Helen can be seen on the far left of the picture, showing how this 'summer house' looked in the 1700s, when the Thomas family acquired the estate and gave it that controversial name. The tower's appearance changed in the 19th-century to what we see today, complete with battlements (see page 31) for a more medieval appearance. Caernarfon's holy well (whichever it was!) is no longer accessible to the public, but the road below it is still called Saint Helen's Road, now lined with modern industrial units and such like, as seen in the photograph on page 29.

We should recall that Caernarfon became an English colonial borough, so the name Helen appears here, rather than Elen to whom the chapel is likely to have been originally dedicated, perhaps even during her saintly lifetime in 4th-century Roman Venedotia (North Wales). Her sons Peblig and Cystennin both had chapels built in their honour in the region, and it is just possible that their father Magnus Maximus drew upon imperial resources to fund their construction. Why would he not do the same at Segontium's riverside for his partner Elen? Afterall, it is a story of love that we read in the *Mabinogion*.











After several centuries of warfare with the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, like their English neighbours the Welsh also had to contend with the consequences of the Norman conquest after 1066. The following year a peace settlement between Norman England and the Welsh had been achieved, as recorded in the *Chronicle of Croyland Abbey*. The Welsh, 'in consideration of their swearing fealty and paying due service to the kingdom of England each year, granted to them, Wales, to hold the same in peace to themselves and to their posterity'.<sup>1</sup> This was a hollow gesture on the part of the conquering Duke William of Normandy, now king of all England, and subsequent events were to take a heavy toll on Wales.

An entry for the year 1092 in the *Welsh Chronicle of the Princes (Brut y Tywysogion)* finds the writer prematurely gloating over the victories against the English by the succeeding Norman-French monarch, William II (c.1056-1100), saying that the king, 'by a most glorious war prevailed over the Saxons'. The same entry then goes on to illustrate how the Welsh seized upon the king being away abroad to go on a spree of vengeful vandalism in the increasingly occupied territories of Wales: 'Whilst William remained in Normandy, the Britons [the Welsh] resisted the domination of the French, not being able to bear their cruelty, and demolished their castles in Gwynedd [...] and demolished all the castles of Ceredigion and Dyfed'.<sup>2</sup>

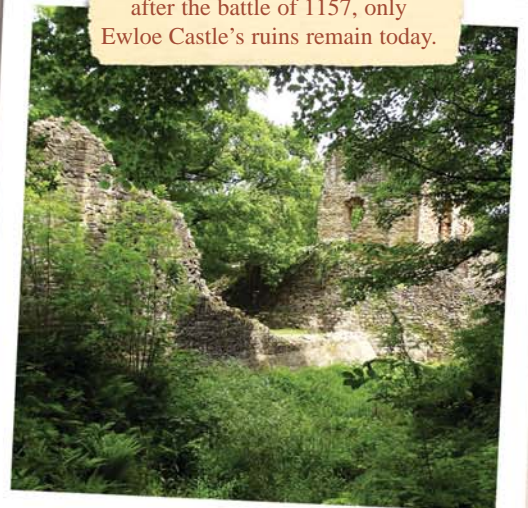
As usual, with conquest comes colonisation of one form or another, and the Normans, when not importing their own kith and kin from Normandy itself were encouraging incursions by others from northern Europe. The Benedictine monk and chronicler, Orderic Vitalis described events in Wales towards the end of the reign of Henry I (c.1068-1135), noting for the year 1134: 'At this time the Welsh-Britons were grievously oppressed by the various races who live under the rule of King Henry; and several of their provinces were granted to the Flemings, by whom they were butchered like dogs, without any regard for humanity, whenever they could track them out, in the woods and caves in which they lurked. The braver spirits among the Welsh finding this, became so indignant, that their courage was again roused, and flying to arms, they broke into fierce rebellion against king Henry, and made ample reprisals in revenge for their losses'.<sup>3</sup>

The grandson of Henry I inherited the throne of England in 1154, becoming King Henry II (1133-1189), and he was the first of the Plantagenet monarchs. Like his Norman predecessors, Henry II saw the Welsh as a problem that had to be resolved, his realm of England bordering the territories of those troublesome Britons. The king's savage attitude towards the Welsh is amply illustrated in the chronicle of Roger de Hoveden from Yorkshire, a man who represented his monarch on several missions. Hoveden's annals for the year 1166 record the following account of the king's so-called 'justice' after yet more warfare across the border: 'Henry, King of England, returned from Normandy to England, and marched with a great army into Wales, where he lost many of his nobles, barons, and men. He also did justice upon the sons of Rees [Rhys ap Gruffydd (1132-1197), ruler in southern Wales], and upon the sons and daughters of his nobles, for he had the eyes of the male children put out, and cut off the noses and ears of the females'.<sup>4</sup>

King Henry's rage against the Welsh exploded as a result of his army's defeats at the Battle of Ewloe (1157) and the Battle of Berwyn (1165). And as if this was not humiliating enough for the king, Owain Gwynedd (c.1100-1170) was actively seeking to forge an alliance with King Louis VII of France. The sons of the Gwynedd ruler paid a very heavy price for what Henry saw as open treachery by their father: Cadwallon and Cynwrig were both blinded on Henry's orders and they were probably also castrated.

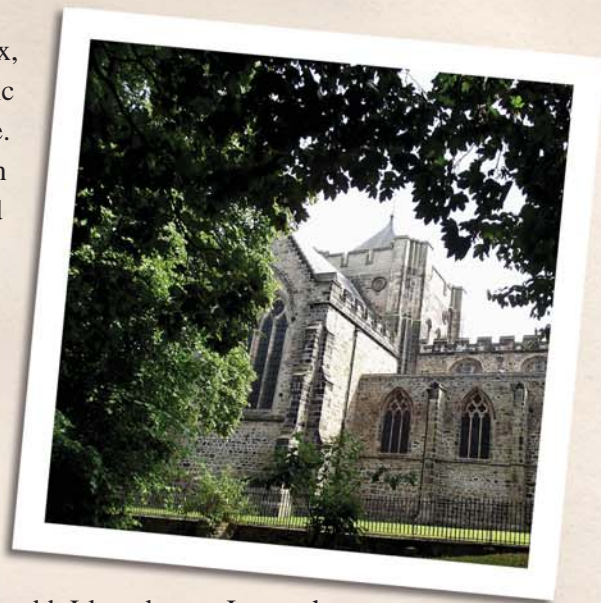
Animosity between these nations knew no bounds, whether in matters temporal or spiritual. Henry II is famed for tacitly ordering the murder of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury the king had appointed in 1162. It was this churchman who had excommunicated Owain Gwynedd, ostensibly because his second marriage had been to his cousin, an act forbidden under

Built by a Gwynedd ruler a century after the battle of 1157, only Ewloe Castle's ruins remain today.





church law. The reality of the situation was actually more complex, stemming from the struggle with the independently-minded Celtic Church that had been rumbling on since the time of Augustine. When Owain appointed his own choice to be bishop of Bangor in his kingdom of Gwynedd, Becket strongly objected and refused to endorse the appointment. Owain cunningly arranged for his nominee, Arthur of Bardsey, to be consecrated in Ireland. When Owain died in 1170 he was entombed in the cathedral at Bangor, (pictured right) and while on a visit there in 1188 one of Becket's successors to the See of Canterbury, Baldwin, was horrified to see the tomb of Owain, who had died in a state of anathema and should not, therefore, have been buried in a consecrated place. Baldwin ordered that the body be removed from the Welsh cathedral.



By the end of the 12th-century we find the ruler of Gwynedd, Llywelyn ap Iorwerth ('The Great') complaining to Pope Innocent III about the appointments being made by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Hubert Walter. Llywelyn's letter <sup>5</sup> bemoans the fact that Walter was only appointing Englishmen as bishops in Wales, and the Welsh rulers found this objectionable, mainly because the appointees knew neither the customs nor the country's language. The Anglo-Norman elite were determined to control the Welsh both in body and spirit, taking whatever steps they felt necessary to achieve their goals.

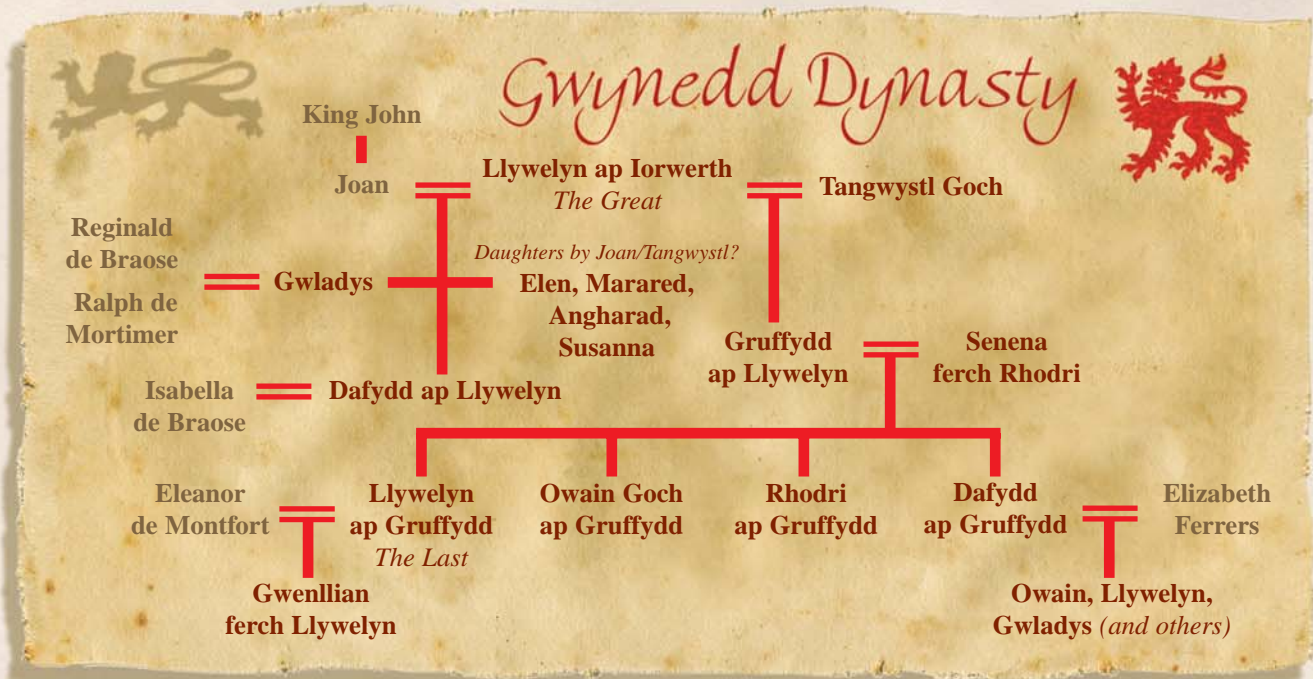
At the dawn of the 1200s the rich and powerful Norman barons were well and truly entrenched in the 'buffer zone' that was known as the Welsh Marches, the frontier areas between England and Wales. Although these nobles were on the face of it answerable to the king of England, the Marcher Lords operated in a decidedly independent and different manner to their lordship counterparts in the rest of England, enjoying privileges and feudal power that rendered their territories almost like autonomous states.

In 1199 King Richard I (born 1157) of England died and was succeeded by his much-maligned brother John (1166-1216), a king whose well-known tussles with barons led to *Magna Carta*. Over the forever shifting border with Wales things were pretty much business as usual, the remnant lands of the Britons largely comprising the northern kingdom of Gwynedd and the southern Deheubarth, plus the north-central Wales area of Powys. By the year 1200 the Gower area of South Wales was intensively colonised, the Normans continuing a strategy of promoting immigration that had evolved in the reign of Henry I. The Marcher Lords enthusiastically pursued this policy, with not only Norman-French settlers arriving, both nobles and peasants, but also other immigrants from mainland Europe, all looking to start a new life in the towns that grew up around the great castles. Grants of formerly Welsh land were an attractive inducement to these medieval 'economic migrants', again including Flemish people from what is now Belgium and adjacent areas. Many were highly skilled in weaving with wool, a long-standing mainstay of the Welsh economy. Centuries earlier in Rome a woollen cloak from the province of Britannia was an expensive and much sought after luxury garment.

Once more relations between these settlers and the Welsh in the south were explosive, as illustrated in the *Chronicle of the Princes* for the early 1200s: 'Llywelyn, son of Iorwerth, cited to him most of the princes of all Wales, and collected a vast army to go against the Flemings of Rhos and Pembroke, because of their breaking the peace and the treaty, which the men of England had made between the English and the Welsh, by their committing frequent depredations upon the Welsh, and harassing them'. Five days of burning castles and towns followed, 'making vast slaughter', until finally a truce was arrived at and the Welsh 'returned back joyful and happy'. And no doubt with an abundance of Flemish war booty to assuage their wounded honour.

King John's low regard for the Welsh is amply illustrated by an entry in the state records (*Misae Roll*, 14th year of John: 1212-1213) from his reign: 'a payment of six shillings to William, the man of Adam Crok,





for bringing six heads of Welsh men, servants of Cadwallon, to the king at Rochester.’<sup>6</sup> In the king’s eyes a Welshman’s life was worth but a shilling, a contemptible and provocative insult that struck at the heart of Llywelyn the Great. In King John’s time there was a generous bounty of five shillings on each wolf killed. Like his grandfather Owain Gwynedd, Llywelyn also courted alliances with France, corresponding with the French monarch between 1212 and 1216. A letter from Llywelyn to King Phillip II (reign 1180-1223) survives in the archives in Paris, and in it Llywelyn declares that he would keep Phillip’s letter of treaty in a church, as though it were a ‘*sacred relic*’. Such power games could prove dangerous, but war was to be avoided at all costs, if only because of the economic drain on the king’s resources, since John was only too well aware as he stared at his dwindling revenues. Was there another approach to achieve peace with the Welsh rulers?

The Welsh nobility of the early 13th-century did what nobles were engaged in everywhere: dynastic marriages using sons and daughters as pawns in the volatile game of alliances. King John’s illegitimate daughter Joan was the pawn her father was to move next, and she was betrothed to Llywelyn in 1204. The previous year the Welsh ruler had been negotiating for the hand of the daughter of the king of the Isle of Man, even going so far as to get papal approval for a marriage. However, Llywelyn could see the political and strategic advantage in marrying John’s ‘natural’ daughter, essentially making him a family member with his powerful English neighbour. Subsequent negotiations with Pope Honorius III even led to a special dispensation to legitimise Joan, ‘*without prejudice to the English king or realm*’.

Llywelyn’s daughter Gwladys was subsequently married off into the elite of the Marcher Lordships, becoming yet another pawn in the chequered pattern of peace. She was married to Reginald de Braose, and after he died in 1228 this Welsh noblewoman was then married into the Mortimer family. Gwynedd’s ruler was playing the game to the hilt, and another daughter, Elen married John of Scotland, Earl of Huntingdon. Some uncertainty as to the mother of Llywelyn’s daughters clouds the genealogy of this dynasty.

Peace between England and Wales rarely lasted for long, and after yet more trouble, Llywelyn moved his seemingly most effective piece in the alliance boardgame, as recorded in the *Chronicle of the Princes* for the year 1210: ‘*Then Llywelyn, being unable to bear the cruelty of the king [John], by the advice of his liege men, sent his wife Joan who was daughter of the king, to the king, to make peace between him and the king, in any manner she might be able*’. Hostages were handed over and gifts of horses and cattle were presented, plus some Welsh territory, so that ‘*the king returned victoriously, and with extreme joy, to England*’. In 1212 King John ordered that the twenty-eight Welsh hostages – boys aged between twelve and fourteen – be hanged



over the walls of Nottingham Castle, an outrage that incensed the Welsh nobility whose children had been treated in so barbaric a manner.

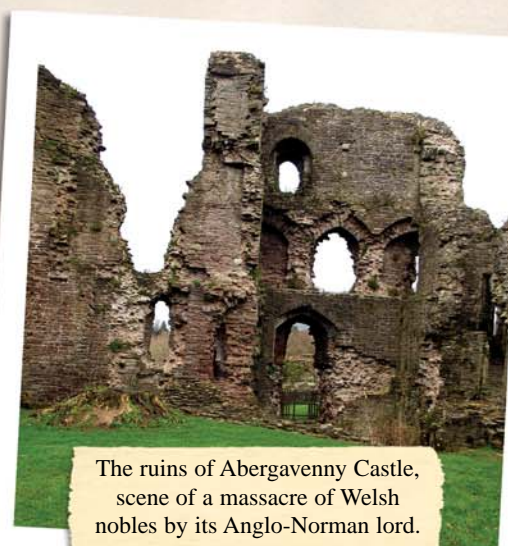
By 1215 King John was once more seeking peace terms with *'his beloved son Llywelyn'*. The king's letter of that year informed the Welsh ruler that he should meet with his emissaries, who included the Bishop of Coventry and the Justice of Chester. The letter says, *'you should plight your fealty to them upon those things which they will say to you on our behalf [...]. Know you that, if you abide by this, we will be mutually good friends.'*<sup>7</sup> Friendship seemed an unlikely outcome. With the death in 1216 of King John, Llywelyn's royal father-in-law, the Welsh ruler subsequently had to contend with the successor to the English throne, Henry III, whose son – the future King Edward I – became known to history as the 'Hammer of the Scots' (Latin *Scotorum Malleus*), as inscribed on his tomb in Westminster Abbey.

Edward was to prove to be the nail in the coffin of Wales towards the end of the century, and he never forgot the defeats he experienced as a young warrior prince, doing battle with the Welsh freedom fighters. As one medieval chronicler, Matthew Paris (c.1200-1259) commented: *'Edward was not a little ashamed and injured by the rebellion of the Welsh as well as by their bravery, for he was called the lord of the Welsh, and yet could not check their rebellious proceedings'*. The chronicler went on to stress what Prince Edward was up against in implementing his ambitions and those of his father, King Henry III: *'There were of these Welsh ten thousand armed horsemen, and a great many more foot soldiers, who had entered into a confederacy and sworn on the gospels boldly and faithfully to fight to the death for the liberty of their country and the laws of their ancestors, declaring that they would rather die with honour than drag on an unhappy life in disgrace.'*<sup>8</sup>

As was his custom and practice, Llywelyn continued wheeling and dealing with Marcher Lords, one such being the influential third Earl of Pembroke, Richard Marshall, but he died fighting in Ireland in 1234, a considerable loss in the Anglo-Welsh game of alliances. Another was William de Braose (c.1197-1230), a Norman lord of sizable territories in the southern borderlands. Llywelyn decided to move his next pawn, his son and would-be heir, Dafydd, who was to be married to Isabella, the daughter of William in an alliance with the ruling house of Gwynedd. In 1230 William was at Llywelyn's court and abused the Welsh ruler's hospitality in a big way. William was caught in bed with Joan, Llywelyn's wife, and while she was punished with a year's house arrest for her infidelity, the Marcher Lord had an altogether different fate. The marriage went ahead between Dafydd and Isabella, whose father missed the wedding, having been publicly hanged by Llywelyn on the 2nd of May in 1230.

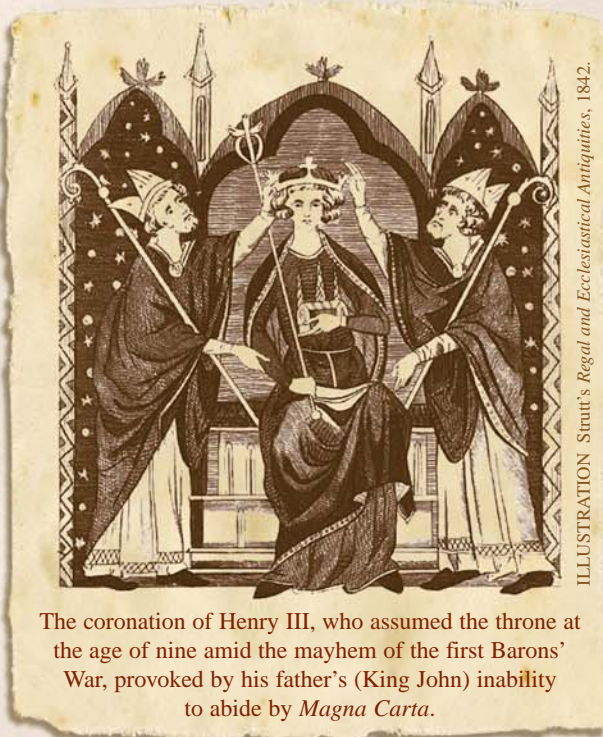
Folk-memory has recorded this event in a place-name in the parish of Llanllechid in Snowdonia: *'There is a cave in a field called Cae Gwilym Ddu [Black William's Field], where William de Braose was buried, after having been executed on suspicion of too great a familiarity with Joan.'*<sup>9</sup> The Braose Norman dynasty seems to have had a notoriously poor grasp of just what hospitality meant, especially when 'entertaining' the Welsh. Another William de Braose, the fourth Lord of Bamber who died in 1211 was a favourite at the English court of King John. In 1175 this Marcher Lord had invited a group of Welsh nobles to spend Christmas at his castle in Abergavenny (pictured right) in Monmouthshire, the yuletide theme being one of goodwill to all men. For his unarmed Welsh guests it was anything but – the festive occasion led to their wholesale murder by their host's soldiers. Shortly after the slaughter in the castle, the baron and his men are said to have headed for the home of one of the princely leaders and murdered his seven year-old son, hoping thereby to extinguish that particular Welsh royal family once and for all.

Yet another Norman lord, this time the influential Hubert de Burgh (c.1160-c.1243), was to be the source of more



The ruins of Abergavenny Castle, scene of a massacre of Welsh nobles by its Anglo-Norman lord.





strife for Llywelyn, some of whose men had been beheaded by the baron's garrison at Montgomery. The Gwynedd ruler marched south with his troops and by fire and sword took his revenge. Over in England King Henry responded by invading Wales, but he did not get very far, while other Marcher Lords were at each other's throats as usual. Eventually, a peace treaty was signed in 1234 between England and Wales, but like so many others it was only as durable as the parchment it was written on. Matthew Paris noted how Prince Edward, unable to secure funding from his father, borrowed from his uncle to fill his war-chest, *'being determined to check the impetuous rashness of the Welsh, to punish their presumption, and to wage war against them to their extermination'*. Edward was to have his day, but not until he succeeded his father on the English throne.

There is a curious story relating to Hubert de Burgh, Llywelyn and a most unusual gemstone. Although Hubert held high office under both King John

and the young King Henry, he eventually fell victim to the plots of his enemies, including accusations made by Peter des Roches, Bishop of Winchester, resulting in Hubert's imprisonment in 1232. Among the charges brought against him was that which claimed he had stolen a large gemstone from the king's treasury and given it to Llywelyn. Improbably enough, the gemstone was said to render the wearer invincible in battle, a point that would not have gone down well with the English monarchs. Dissatisfaction with these two kings led powerful barons to join forces with the Welsh rulers in the 13th-century, although the effectiveness of this item of jewellery remained to be seen. Matthew Paris recounts the story in his *Chronica Majora*, and it illustrates how alliances between the barons of England and the rulers of Wales would wax and wane as frequently as the inconstant moon.

By the 1230s the ageing Llywelyn had finalised his plans for the future of Gwynedd and Wales without his leadership. Joan and Llywelyn's son Dafydd was of their marriage, but the eldest son of Llywelyn, Gruffydd was the offspring of an extra-marital liaison with a Welsh woman called Tangwystl. This rather curious name has the meaning of 'peace hostage' – perhaps more of a role than a personal name: peace (Welsh *tang*) and pledge/hostage (Welsh *gwystl*). Her father was Llywarch, Lord of Rhos in what is now Denbighshire. She may have been named after a much earlier Tangwystl, who is described as a prophetess and kinswoman of Gruffydd ap Cynan (1055-1137), the king of Gwynedd.

Ordinarily, the eldest son would have been the heir, regardless of legitimacy under Welsh law and custom, but Llywelyn was set on Dafydd succeeding him to the throne of Gwynedd. In the 1220s Pope Honorius had issued confirmation of Dafydd's right of succession, in accordance with his father's wishes and those of his mother Joan. King Henry III had also approved of the arrangement, knowing his now legitimised sister Joan would be strategically placed within Gwynedd's hierarchy. Accordingly, Dafydd would assume the title of 'Prince of Wales', his father Llywelyn having been simply styled 'Prince of Aberffraw (the palace in Anglesey) and Lord of Snowdon'.

Following the death of his wife Joan in 1237, Llywelyn's health declined and he retired to the Cistercian Abbey of Aberconwy, where he died and was entombed in 1240. When Joan had died Llywelyn had founded a friary for her tomb at Llanfaes on the Anglesey coast, facing Gwynedd's mainland. Her sarcophagus (pictured on page 125) was to attract the attention of a 19th-century historian, who noted what he described as 'an anomaly' in its overall form: *'It is not shaped like the medieval stone coffins [...] but is in*



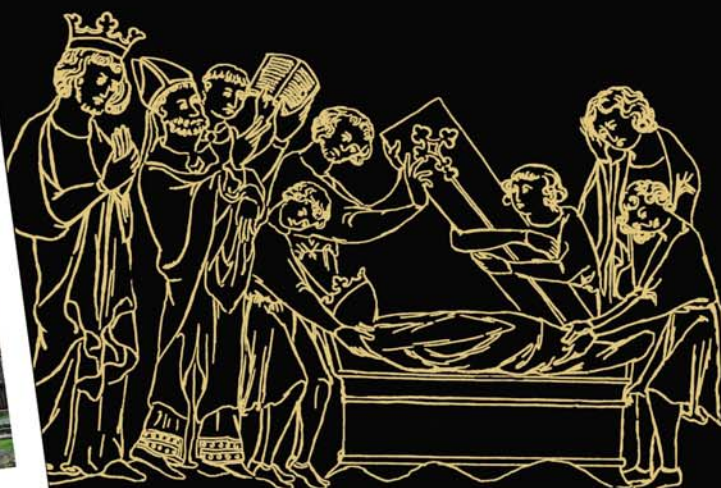


ILLUSTRATION Strutt's *Regal and Ecclesiastical Antiquities*, 1842.

When Llywelyn's wife Joan died in 1237, he founded a Franciscan friary near Llanfaes in Anglesey where her sarcophagus was placed. During the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1537, her sarcophagus disappeared, but many years later it was discovered being used as a water trough for horses in Beaumaris. Since 1808 it has been kept in the church of Saints Mary and Nicholas.



ILLUSTRATION Parry's *Royal Visits and Progresses to Wales*, 1851.



One of the fine wood carvings. The stalls in the church were brought from the friary of Llanfaes at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries.



15th-century tomb effigies of William Bulkeley and his wife.



the form of a parallelogram, which induces me to think it may have been originally a Roman sarcophagus brought from Segontium [...] and in the thirteenth century used for a secondary interment, that of the Princess Joan.<sup>10</sup> Joan's sarcophagus is now kept in the 14th-century church of Saints Mary and Nicholas in Beaumaris, where many other fine artefacts are to be seen.

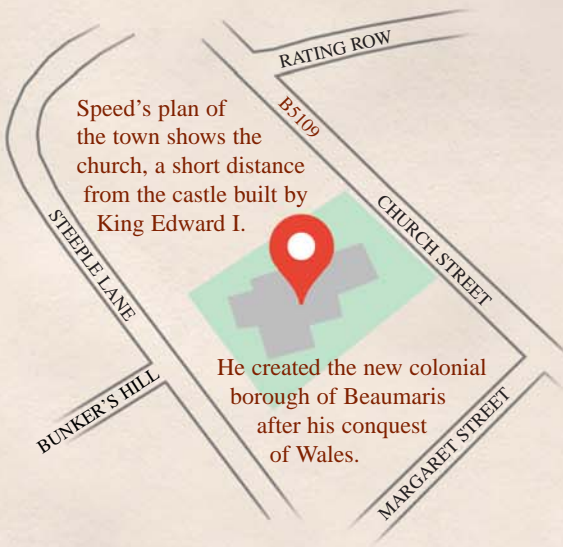


Detail of the 19th-century drawing.

Could the circular cross pendant, shown on the effigy of Joan's sarcophagus, contain a fragment of the Welsh Cross relic? The figure's hands are clearly intended to draw the eye to this object, the outer circle of which is studded to indicate jewels.



Although the stone is heavily weathered some details remain.



John Speed's map of Anglesey from 1610.





# CRICCIETH CASTLE



*“Dafydd had seized Gruffydd  
by deception and kept him  
confined in Criccieth  
Castle, fearing his kin  
might seek to usurp  
the lead role.”*



Things were certainly not all quiet on the Welsh front following Llywelyn's death. Dafydd had seized Gruffydd by deception and kept him confined in Criccieth Castle, fearing his kin might seek to usurp the lead role; a common enough occurrence in these days of dynastic struggles. The Benedictine monk and copious chronicler, Matthew Paris expressed the generally-held dim view of Dafydd's kidnapping of Gruffydd, as did Richard the Bishop of Bangor, who excommunicated Dafydd before fleeing over the border, as the chronicler recounted: *'He now went to the king of England, and laid a severe complaint before him of this base crime, and earnestly entreated of the king to release Griffin [Gruffydd], who was thus unjustly detained a prisoner [...] The king, therefore, severely reproached his nephew David [Dafydd] for his treachery, and both advised and ordered him to liberate his brother'*. Dafydd stubbornly dismissed the king of England's order, arguing that if Gruffydd were released, *'Wales would never after enjoy security and peace'*. With much secrecy Gruffydd by-passed his half-brother and got word to the king, saying in the words of the chronicler, *'that if he would release him from prison, he would in future hold his territory from him, the king'*, offering also cash and a hostage, plus worst of all, that he Gruffydd, *'would diligently assist him to subdue the Welsh at a distance'*.<sup>11</sup> One treacherous act would lead to another in this internecine struggle, and no doubt King Henry could barely contain his glee at this opportunity to divide and rule, all the while appearing to act from the moral high ground over Gruffydd's imprisonment by Dafydd.

The Welsh dragon had now roused the English lion yet again. King Henry mustered the army and marched towards the border, leaving Dafydd considering his rather limited options. Being at that point excommunicate would have weighed heavily on Dafydd's mind, and as if that were not bad enough, not all the Welsh nobles backed his stance on this issue of questionable 'brotherly love'. And then there was the size of the foe railed against him. At the eleventh hour Dafydd realised that discretion may be the better part of valour, and he sent word to Henry that he would release Gruffydd into the king's custody.

This proposed action was confirmed by treaty in August 1241, which was followed by the transfer to the king of territory in what is now Flintshire, confirmed in October of that year. What is especially interesting about the *Letters Patent* relating to these

agreements is that they contain what is probably the earliest extant references to the *Welsh Cross*, as mentioned in this book's Introduction. Dafydd, along with the seneschal, or steward of the royal household of Gwynedd, Ednyfed Fychan, both *'swore on the holy cross'* that Dafydd had brought with him. While we cannot be absolutely certain that this was the famous relic, the use of the word 'holy' was invariably included in references to pieces of the True Cross (Latin *Crucem Sanctam*). By this simple distinction it differentiated such relics from just any ordinary cross, thereby emphasising that the use within the context of swearing an oath would be absolutely and irrevocably binding upon the peril of one's soul.

### King Henry III



In this illustration from a 13th-century manuscript, King Henry is seen casually directing building work on Westminster Abbey. The king devoted considerable resources on the abbey as an act of piety, and it is noteworthy that the king's hand is shown reaching towards a cross within a circle. The abbey had several relics of the True Cross in its collection.

FROM Strutt's *Dress and Habits of the People of England*, 1796.



Gruffydd was finally installed in modest comfort in the Tower of London ‘for safe keeping’, though this hostage role was not new to him: as a boy he was in the protective custody of King John of England as a pledge of good faith from his father, Llywelyn the Great. In 1241 Gruffydd’s sons Dafydd and Rhodri were also held as hostages by Henry, while the eldest son, Owain ap Gruffydd had known the hostage role all too frequently. By 1244 things were about to take a turn for the worse, when on Saint David’s Day Gruffydd made his attempt to escape from the Tower of London, as described in gruesome detail in Holinshed’s chronicle: *‘Wherefore deceiving the watch one night, he [Gruffydd] made a long line of hangings, coverings and sheets, and having gotten out at a window, let down himself by the same from the top of the tower; but by reason that he was a mighty personage and full of flesh, the line broke with the weight of his body, and so falling down headlong of a great height, his neck and head was driven into his body with the fall; whose miserable carcass being found the morrow after, was a pitiful sight to the beholders’*.<sup>12</sup>

These were viewed as ‘suspicious circumstances’ in Wales and, as the *Chronicle of the Princes* noted, Dafydd ‘became enraged and summoned all his good men to him, and attacked his foes, and drove them from all their borders’. This same chronicle goes on to mention that it was not until 1248 that King Henry finally sanctioned the return of Gruffydd’s body to Wales, where it was entombed next to his father, Llywelyn the Great at Aberconwy Abbey. That it took some four years to get the body of Prince Gruffydd returned home is both a measure of the ill-will of this king and also of the stubborn determination of the abbot of Aberconwy. This abbey grew to be the most important in North Wales, thanks to the grants of land by its probable founder, Llywelyn the Great, and also subsequent endowments. In the eyes of the Welsh of the Middle Ages, this abbey was to the kingdom of Gwynedd what Westminster Abbey was to the kingdom of England: a site of potent regal, cultural and spiritual significance. The prominent Welsh antiquary of the 1700s, Lewis Morris commented that Aberconwy’s ‘monks were in such credit among the Welsh in those days, that they believed Heaven was in their gift.’<sup>13</sup>

Dafydd ap Llywelyn ruled in turbulent times and not simply because of the challenges posed by his English neighbours. To survive he needed powerful allies more than ever and, although he was nominally recognised as Prince of Wales, his position was tenuous to say the least. In 1244 Dafydd approached Pope Innocent IV with a proposition that the prince hoped would create some degree of security for himself and the Welsh people. The proposed deal would be that Dafydd would hold Wales from the papacy as a ‘fief’, a term denoting a territory held under an obligation of feudal service, in this case to the pope. King John of England had attempted a similar strategy when confronted with the force of the barons’ revolt. Dafydd’s thinking was that with papal protection through overlordship of Wales, England would not dare to attack this fiefdom of the pope himself for fear of eternal damnation, not to mention the wrath and contempt of other rulers for challenging the authority of Rome. When he got wind of what Dafydd was up to King Henry was furious, just as he had been during the attempts to foster Franco-Welsh alliances. The pope had authorised two Welsh prelates to examine the existing agreement between England and Wales, so as to determine whether an oath of allegiance had been extracted under duress. Henry was summoned to give account but utterly refused to do so. Clearly, a king held more power and influence than a prince, so Henry managed to thwart Dafydd’s efforts at international diplomacy in 1245.



The last rulers of the ancient kingdom of Gwynedd were to come to know the Tower of London only too well, several under the most miserable of circumstances. This illustration, showing London Bridge in the background, is from a manuscript of poetry by Charles, Duke of Orleans (1394-1465).

FROM Benham and Welch, *Medieval London*, 1901.



The following year Dafydd ap Llywelyn died at his court at 'Aber Garth Celyn' (today's Abergwyngregyn) on Gwynedd's northern coast, where the Roman road between Chester and Segontium runs through this important historic site. Dafydd was finally buried near his father's tomb in Aberconwy Abbey. Now just two years after the fatal 'fall' of Gruffydd, the ancient kingdom of Gwynedd was vulnerable, leaving the kind of power vacuum the English king would be happy to fill with his own overlordship, given the right excuse however slight. There remains some uncertainty as to whether Dafydd and Isabella managed to have children, although the *Chronicle of the Princes* is quite emphatic: 'he had no issue of his body'. Of the remaining male royal line of Gwynedd, Gruffydd's son Llywelyn, the grandson of 'the Great' of that name (eventually acquiring the more sombre cognomen, Llywelyn *the Last*) wrestled his way to the top, side-lining his brothers, particularly Owain and ultimately the final member of the princely quartet, the young Rhodri ap Gruffydd (see the family tree on page 122).

King Henry had released Llywelyn's brother Owain, on the face of it so that the Welsh prince could take up his princely entitlement, but really hoping to incite civil war in Wales from which he could obviously benefit, along the lines of divide and rule. And the territories of Gwynedd were, after all, supposed to have been divided between all four brothers, according to Henry's grasp of the customs of Wales. Under the traditional Welsh Law of Cyfran (share), the surviving sons, including illegitimate ones, should inherit equal shares in the late father's estate, and Dafydd felt deeply aggrieved at being denied the Welsh territories he saw as his inheritance or patrimony. In England and elsewhere the system of primogeniture prevailed, whereby the eldest son inherited the lion's share of everything. It was not until the time of Henry VIII that primogeniture was finally adopted in Wales through legislation passed in 1535.

In 1255 the brothers Dafydd and Owain mounted a military assault on Llywelyn, but they were defeated at the Battle of Bryn Derwin in Gwynedd, when Llywelyn won the field with ease and imprisoned his usurping brothers. Owain is thought to have been incarcerated for some twenty years in Dolbadarn Castle (right), near Llanberis, before being released under the terms of the Treaty of Aberconwy of 1277.

The matter of territories and their boundaries remained at the top of everyone's agenda, including the son of Henry III, Prince Edward, who thought little of provoking the Welsh. The *Chronicle of the Princes* records Edward's actions in the year 1255, when he arrived in North Wales to 'take a survey of his castles and lands in Gwynedd'. After Edward's return to England following his stock-taking expedition, the Welsh nobles, according





to this chronicle, *'came to Llywelyn, son of Gruffydd, having been robbed of their liberty, and made captives, and complainingly declared to him that they would rather be killed in war for their liberty, than suffer themselves to be trodden down by strangers in bondage'*. It would not be too long before Edward would be only too pleased to oblige them with a death in battle, but the Welsh climate thwarted one attempt, as Holinshed's chronicle noted: Edward *'could not bring his purpose to pass, by reason of the unseasonable weather and continual rain [...] raising the waters and setting the marshes on floods, that he could not pass with his army'*.

By the 1260s fate was to deal a hand to Llywelyn that seemed to provide a winning combination, as England was plunged into a conflict that became known as the Second Barons' War, the first (1215-17) having been provoked by King John. Broadly spanning the period from 1264 to 1267, the breaking-point of the constitutional crisis was largely caused by King Henry's increasing demands for greater crown revenues, and also a more general dissatisfaction among England's nobility with the king's poor government of the realm. Widespread famine at the time simply compounded the feeling of discontent. Over in Wales Llywelyn had been equally discontent, with a flurry of letters between the Welsh ruler and Henry in 1262, complaining that the Marcher Lord, Roger Mortimer was stirring up trouble in the south, while others reported to the king that Llywelyn had been *'advancing his frontier'*.

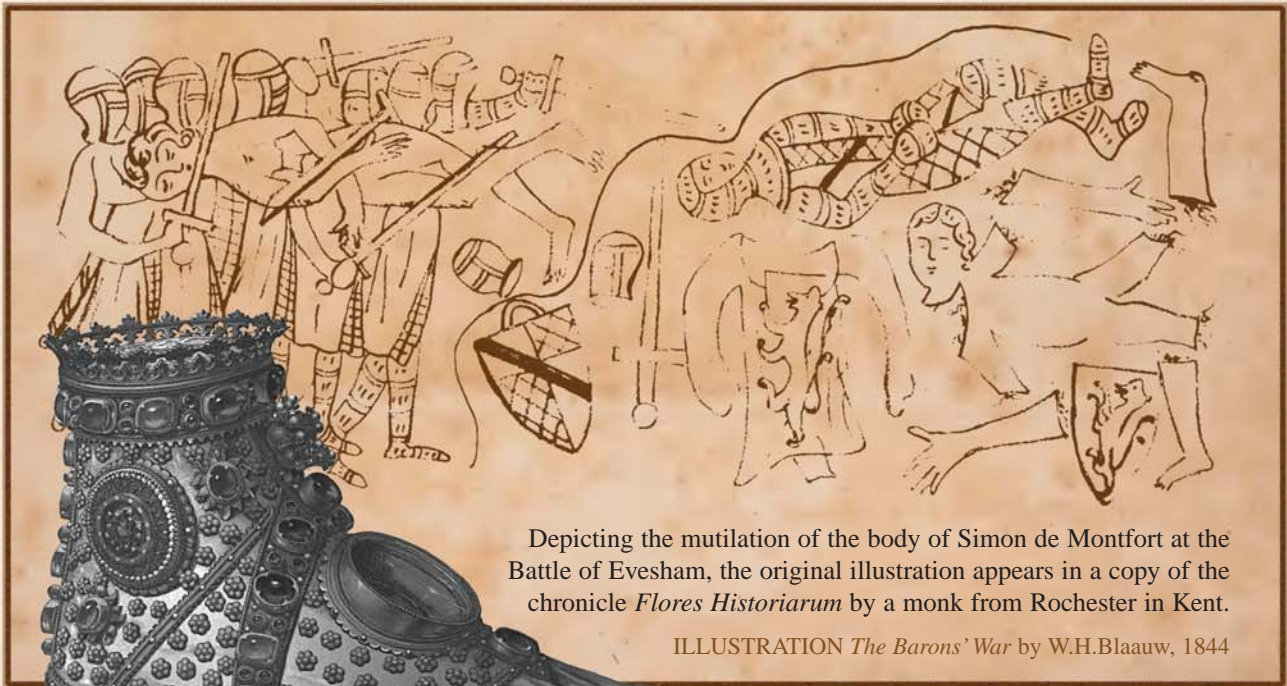
The Earl of Leicester, Simon de Montfort, eventually became leader of the uprising against Henry's approach to government, which had been severely challenged in 1258, when the baronial council sought more power and reform towards a more parliamentary system. It was also in this year that contact between the Montforts and Gwynedd took place, when Llywelyn had appointed the Abbot of Aberconwy to act as an emissary in negotiations with King Henry. The abbot was escorted to the meeting with the king at Oxford by Peter de Montfort – Simon's son – and the result was a thirteen month truce, which cost Llywelyn one hundred marks, although he was permitted to retain territory he had recently conquered. Not long afterwards Llywelyn was complaining to the king that the truce was being broken by the English.

Henry was eventually forced to face up to the barons' demands in 1258, but with the same level of reluctance that his father King John had shown to the potential loss of absolute power of the monarchy. Over the next couple of years the pendulum of power swung both ways, with Montfort fleeing abroad at one point, and then returning in 1263 to gather the dissident barons and their forces. Civil war broke out and the rebel barons stormed London. By February 1264 fear of Welsh forces crossing the River Severn and devastating southern English counties prompted Henry to write to the Sheriff of Gloucester, Roger Clifford, ordering him to destroy the bridges crossing the river.

At the Battle of Lewes in Sussex on the 14th May 1264, Henry's forces were defeated by the barons and the king was taken prisoner, along with his brother Richard of Cornwall and Prince Edward. The following year Montfort met once more with Llywelyn at Hawarden Castle in eastern Gwynedd, and an agreement was signed on 22nd June 1265. As with previous meetings, discussions included a marriage proposal between Llywelyn and Montfort's daughter Eleanor, who was then resident at the French court. The alarming situation even induced Pope Clement IV to issue a mandate in September 1265 to the Cardinal Legate of England, so as to warn Llywelyn to disassociate himself from dealings with Montfort, offering to absolve the Welsh ruler of oaths, promises, fealties and homage to Montfort. And if that did not work, then Llywelyn was to be threatened with excommunication, and that Wales would be placed under a papal interdict, thereby suspending church services and the like while it was in force.

The agreement with Montfort included the provision of Welsh troops in support of the rebels and, according to the *Chronicle of Lanercost*, 5,000 Welsh soldiers appeared on the field at the Battle of Evesham in Worcestershire on 4th August 1265. This time the royalists won the day, led by Prince Edward who had escaped captivity on 28th May 1265 on the pretext of going out for a horse ride to get some exercise – he raised an army instead. Several of Montfort's allies had defected to the king and the earl had been confronted with an army twice the size of his own. What followed at Evesham was nothing short of a massacre.





Depicting the mutilation of the body of Simon de Montfort at the Battle of Evesham, the original illustration appears in a copy of the chronicle *Flores Historiarum* by a monk from Rochester in Kent.

ILLUSTRATION *The Barons' War* by W.H.Blaauw, 1844

ILLUSTRATION  
*The Decorative Arts*  
*Ecclesiastical and Civil of the*  
*Middle Ages* by H.Shaw, 1851

This silver reliquary dates to 1470 when it was in Basle Cathedral. What became of the foot sent to Llywelyn remains unknown. The *Chronicle of Melrose* records a Montfort foot reliquary and mentions miracles associated with it: 'The power of healing shone forth even from the lifeless substance in which it was enshrouded – this shoe of silver.'

Llywelyn's aspirations had been dashed on that bloody battlefield, despite the rousing call of what is known as 'The Song of the Welsh' (*Leyden Manuscript*, Latin document), a call to arms that has survived from the time: 'Come now, vigorously, armed with coats of mail; a great part of the Saxon [English] are fallen in mutual slaughter, the remainder shall be slain by us.'<sup>14</sup> It was not to be and many Welshmen were themselves slaughtered that day at Evesham. What happened to the dead body of Simon de Montfort on that battlefield was truly shocking, even by the standards of the day, when nobility were treated more humanely than the common soldier. Simon's corpse was butchered and various body parts were sent to those who had been enemies of the king, including a foot that was dispatched to Llywelyn in Gwynedd, as recorded in the *Chronicle of Melrose*. King Henry and his son Edward were determined to remind the Welsh ruler of the fate that awaited rebellion against the majesty of England's sovereign lord. Simon's widow, who was Henry's sister, was banished from the kingdom with her daughter Eleanor, son Amauri and other children.

On 25th September 1267 Llywelyn met with the papal legate and Henry at Shrewsbury, and there the Welsh ruler finally did homage to the king as his liege lord. The treaty between them saw territory in eastern Gwynedd restored to Llywelyn, but he was obliged to pay a colossal fine. Not long afterwards Llywelyn wrote to the king's younger brother, Richard of Cornwall with whom he had gone on crusade in 1240, thanking him for his input in brokering peace, but complaining that the terms of the treaty were onerous.

It is not recorded what Llywelyn did with the grotesque 'gift' of Simon de Montfort's foot after the Battle of Evesham. The late Earl of Leicester was to achieve a degree of saintly status in England's folk-memory. In standing up to an unpopular king he had achieved popularity himself among the people, and his veneration was widespread in that area of Warwickshire. On the edge of the battlefield was a spring known as the Earl's Well, and a monk of Evesham compiled a list of over two hundred miracles attributed to the late Montfort's intervention. This so irritated the king that in the edict called the *Dictum of Kenilworth*, issued in October 1266, it was expressly forbidden to refer to his deceased enemy as a saint.



After a reign of well over half a century, Henry III's Plantagenet crown of England finally passed to his son Edward, whose coronation took place in 1274, following his return from crusade to the Holy Land. Although 'invited' to the coronation Llywelyn did not attend. It was not the first time a prince of Gwynedd had snubbed an English monarch and, as the chronicle *Flores Historiarum* records, the king's command was again ignored in 1275: '*King Edward stayed some time in the district of Cheshire, and then he ordered Llywelyn, prince of Wales, who would not appear in person before him, to be formally summoned to attend at his parliament at Westminster; whither, however, he would not come, saying he remembered the death of his father Griffith [Gruffydd], who fell from the Tower of London, and broke his neck, and died*'.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, Llywelyn's brother Dafydd was busily acquiring substantial estates in England, having married Elizabeth, the young widow of a wealthy aristocrat and the daughter of the Earl of Derby, and he appears to have enjoyed a relatively comfortable relationship with King Edward. Dafydd's motives were probably not born of any great love of the English or their king. He simply wanted what was, after all, his birthright as a prince of the royal house of Gwynedd. Although he had been reconciled with his brother Llywelyn through an agreement of 1269, a deep mistrust inevitably prevailed in their relationship. In the 1270s Edward's attitude to the troublesome Llywelyn is exposed in state documents (*Patent Rolls* 23rd August 1277) from the king's stay at Flint Castle in North Wales. He issued a '*Grant to David son of Griffith [Dafydd ap Gruffydd] that in the event of the king conquering Llywelyn, his brother, the king will restore to David and Owen [Owain ap Gruffydd] his brother a moiety [portion or share] of the whole of Snowdon, and the Llyn [Llyn Peninsula], and a moiety of Anglesey and Pentlin*', this last being an area of south-central Gwynedd. Two months later on 10th October 1277, King Edward issued a land grant to Dafydd in north-east Wales, '*to hold until he should have obtained all his inheritance*.'

Like his grandfather and name-sake, this Llywelyn had sought to foster the well-established European model of one king ruling over a single, homogeneous kingdom, with the rest of the nobility owing fealty to the overlord. This had eventually happened with the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, such as Mercia, Wessex, Northumbria and so on, all fusing to become one England, not long before William the Conqueror decided to grab the lot for himself and his fellow Normans. On the other hand, Dafydd believed his birthright was a shared kingdom with Llywelyn; human nature and the lust for power made that an unlikely outcome. Dafydd's hope that King Edward of England could help him achieve his goal was at best naive and at worst an implied act of treason against Gwynedd. Edward never forgot the symbolic battle scars of his earlier encounters with Welsh princes when he too was a prince, and for him the eventual destiny of Wales was incorporation into the Plantagenet Empire – whatever it took.

In 1275 Llywelyn had ignored Edward's summons to attend him at Chester and in October of the same year he disregarded another to attend the king at Westminster. The Welsh ruler maintained this stance the following year, when he was summoned to Winchester in January and Westminster again in April of 1276. Finally, in 1277 after much bloodshed between their respective forces Llywelyn's options were so reduced he set out for Rhuddlan Castle to meet with Edward, whose army had just stormed Anglesey, the *Chronicle of the Princes* saying that, '*the king's host in ships burned Anglesey and took away its corn*'. While Anglesey



ILLUSTRATION *Antiquities of England* by Joseph Strutt, 1842.



may not have produced enough corn to feed the whole of Wales – a dubious tradition – the total loss of this harvest threatened starvation for Llywelyn's forces and the people of Gwynedd. The Welsh ruler had no option but to capitulate and seek the best terms possible from the king of England.

Edward's ambitions were now increasingly being realised, particularly after the Treaty of Aberconwy (1277), stemming from a humiliating defeat of the Welsh that saw both dignity and territory lost to England's ruthless monarch. Llywelyn's Gwynedd shrank dramatically, the eastern areas going to the English Crown, some further territory allocated to Dafydd, and expansion of Marcher Lordships that were vassals of the king. Again recorded in the *Flores Historiarum* chronicle, the terms of the treaty had been devastating in magnitude, both for Llywelyn personally and for the royal house of Gwynedd: '*Accordingly, king Edward received homage and fealty from the most powerful chiefs of the Welsh, and took their prince Llywelyn with him to Westminster, from whom he received fifty thousand marks [five thousand?] in hand; and with whom he made a covenant to receive a thousand marks every year, to be paid into the exchequer for the Isle of Anglesey and the district of Snowdon; and then he permitted the aforesaid prince to return to those parts, after having been carefully instructed in duty. By a formal sentence depriving his successors for ever of the title of prince, and reserving all the rest of the territories of Wales which he had lately made himself master of for himself and his successors, the kings of England*'.

At the beginning of December Edward had issued an order (*Welsh Rolls* 6th December 1277) from Worcester, granting Llywelyn and his entourage safe conduct while in England, since the king had invited him to spend Christmas with him at the royal court. No doubt Llywelyn would have had misgivings, but he knew the odds were now utterly stacked against him, so for the sake of much-needed peace and goodwill he journeyed to London, where he was surrounded by former enemies. On Christmas Day he had been obliged to pay homage to King Edward before the nobles of England. The humiliation was complete and it was not confined to Llywelyn alone, the retinue from Wales who went with him finding themselves in a worrying environment: '*they were still more offended at the crowds of people, that flocked about them, when they stirred abroad, staring at them as if they had been monsters, and laughing at their uncouth garb and appearance*'.<sup>16</sup>

There was, however, another matter that also weighed heavily on Llywelyn's mind in this period, concerning Eleanor de Montfort, whom Llywelyn had married by proxy while she was exiled in France after her father's death. Like any other monarch, King Edward's intelligence network in Europe was a sophisticated affair, and the king is bound to have heard of the proxy marriage of two people he regarded with deep suspicion. Edward's spies were one step ahead of events, according to the accounts of the constable of Dover Castle. Those records show that payments were made to two men for '*repairing the king's galley and sending it to guard the sea coast against the coming of the Bishop of Chichester and Amauri de Montfort*', Eleanor's brother. A further payment was made to the sergeant of Dover Castle for '*going to Paris to lay a snare for the aforesaid Bishop and Amauri*'.<sup>17</sup> Edward's espionage was thwarted when the Montfort's own spies heard of the king's conspiracy. The issue with Chichester's bishop was that he had supported Simon de Montfort in the barons' rebellion in the 1260s.

The intention of Eleanor was to join Llywelyn and four ships set sail from France, heading directly for North Wales. At this point Edward's intelligence sources must have sounded the alarm, and the French ships were intercepted by vessels out of Bristol, obviously on the lookout for the Montfort party, who were then taken to Bristol and the security of its castle. Clearly delighted by this seizure in 1275, Edward rewarded his maritime conspirators and their crews with quite substantial amounts. After a short stay at Bristol Castle Eleanor was placed under house arrest at Windsor Castle, where she remained for nearly three years. Her brother was treated more harshly and was not released from custody until after the pope had finally convinced Edward to set him free in 1282, on condition that he leave the country. Archbishop Peckham's archives show that he gave a letter (dated 14th April 1280) to one of Llywelyn's servants, authorising a visit to Amauri while he was in the custody of a John de Somersete. Amauri's sister Eleanor had also pleaded for his release in a letter of 18th October 1280, beseeching the king to '*hold out the hand of pity*' in this grave matter.



In 1278 the marriage of Llywelyn and Eleanor was solemnised at Worcester Cathedral (below right), attended by King Edward, who, in an order instructing the subsequent conveyance of Eleanor's possessions from Worcester to Oswestry, rather prematurely described the Welsh ruler as '*our beloved and faithful Llywelyn*' (*Liberate Roll*). The king was even quite generous on that occasion, according to the *Chronicle of the Princes*: '*Edward king of England himself bearing the cost of the banquet and nuptial festivities liberally*'. It was pressure from English nobles and Pope John XXI that had really forced Edward's hand into releasing Eleanor, rather than his highly flexible conscience.

The carefully planned kidnapping of an enemy's wife would not have been construed as 'fair game' in the 13th-century, given its cultural emphasis on chivalric behaviour on the part of the nobility. It obviously did not bother King Edward that Eleanor was also his first cousin, and the *Waverley Annals* record that Llywelyn had even offered Edward money for Eleanor's release in 1276. England's meddling in the marital arrangements of Gwynedd's rulers was not a new manoeuvre, since Edward's father Henry had done so in 1258. At that time Llywelyn's sister Margaret was in the charge of Richard Clare, Earl of Gloucester, who was instructed by Henry to prevent her marriage to the choice of husband made by Llywelyn. Sons and daughters continued to be the pawns in the dynastic game and the monarchs of England called check-mate if it threatened their next move.

Although the marriage of Eleanor and Llywelyn took place in the king's presence, it was not without a devious tactic on the part of Edward, as recorded in a letter of 1281 from Llywelyn to John Peckham, the Archbishop of Canterbury. In it the Welsh ruler lists a variety of grievances that he felt should be drawn to the primate's attention, including circumstances surrounding the ceremony at Worcester, when the king, '*promising with very fair words, that he would give his kinswoman to him to wife, and enrich him with much honour: nevertheless when he came thither, the self same day they should be married before mass, the king required a bill [agreement] to be sealed by the prince*'.

Edward had decided to go beyond the previously agreed peace terms, adding a few more clauses and demanding that Llywelyn agree to these there and then before the marriage could proceed. The king had sprung these onerous additions on an unsuspecting Llywelyn,



ILLUSTRATION J. Dallaway, *Antiquities of Bristol in the Middle Centuries*, 1834.

Edward was so pleased by the performance of Bristol's mariners in capturing the Montfort ships, he granted the town the right to commemorate the event in its seal.

## Worcester Cathedral



ILLUSTRATION Storey's *Cathedral Churches*, 1819.

Llywelyn and Eleanor's wedding took place at Worcester Cathedral in 1278, with King Edward I footing the bill.

ILLUSTRATION (below) Strutt's *Antiquities of England*, 1842.





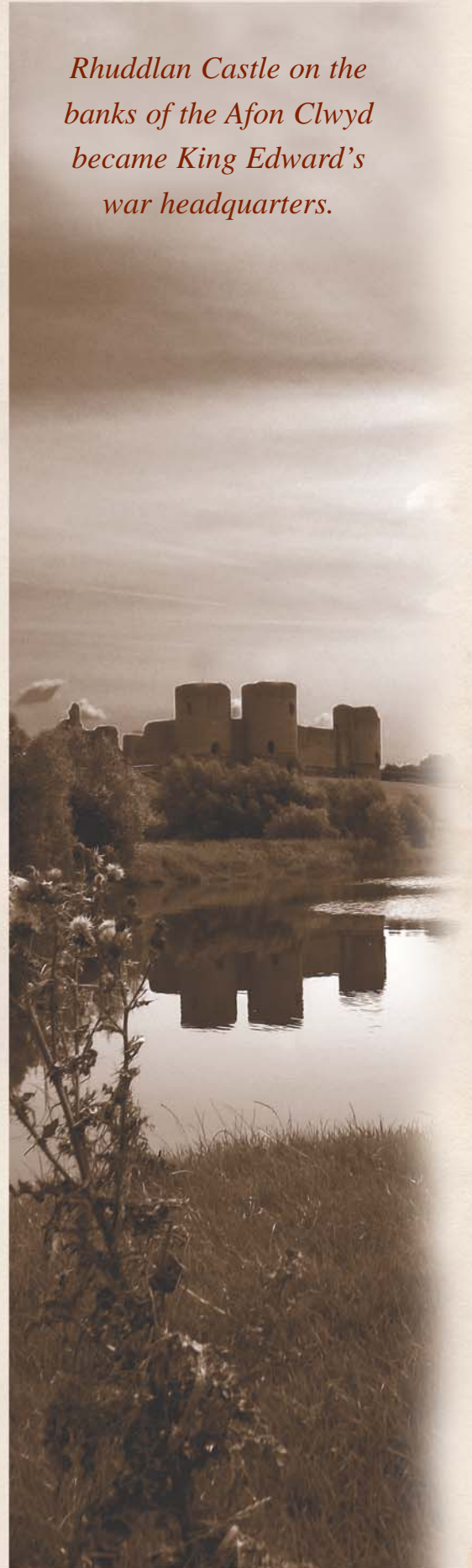
who was poised to go up the aisle in the cathedral. Edward's cunning on that occasion had left Llywelyn complaining later to Archbishop Peckham that the original document had been signed and sealed, and that it had clearly stated that, *'the king should require nothing that was not contained in that agreement'*. King Edward obviously had something of a spoiler up his elegant sleeve on Eleanor and Llywelyn's special day, and the Welsh ruler had fallen into a right royal trap of Plantagenet proportions.

As well as funding the Worcester event in 1278, that same year Edward had released a group of hostages, Welsh nobles who must have wondered if they would ever return to the land of their fathers in those troubled times. Before their departure from England they were obliged to swear an oath of fealty at St. John's Church of the Holy Cross in Chester. The object that was the focus of the formal ceremony was the celebrated Rood of Chester. The oath that the ten hostages were required to swear demonstrates Edward's insistence that their loyalty was to him and not their nation: *'in case Llywelyn or others of Wales shall bear arms against the king hereafter, that they would adhere faithfully to the king and would be against Llywelyn and others thus bearing arms with all their power all their lifetime'* (Welsh Rolls 17th September 1278).

Edward's choice of Chester for this ceremony was not simply because of its proximity to the Welsh border, but rather because this king held the Rood of Chester in particularly high esteem. The *Alms Rolls* recording his charitable donations and oblations to relics, show that while in Chester in 1284 he gave seven pence to the cross, then a more substantial thirty-five shillings in 1290, plus a further seven shillings on his daughter's behalf. In December 1294 the king was back in Chester and made more offerings to the *Crucem Cestrie*, as it is termed in the Latin documents. Soon this king would acquire the *Welsh Cross*, the relic to which he attached ultimate value and veneration, as he progressed his military ambitions for a greatly expanded realm.

Inevitably peace was short-lived between England and Wales. In 1281 Llywelyn was on the war path once more, having seized the castle at Hawarden towards Chester, then going on to lay siege to those at Flint on the wide estuary of the River Dee and also Rhuddlan. The English king choked on his words, regarding Llywelyn as certainly not *'beloved and faithful'* any longer – assuming the Welsh ruler was ever either in reality. Having summoned his nobles to a council of war, Edward led a vast English army into Wales. Rhuddlan Castle (right) fell into the king's hands and he decided to make this stronghold his war headquarters.

*Rhuddlan Castle on the banks of the Afon Clwyd became King Edward's war headquarters.*





A document discovered in the Tower of London in 1805 contains detailed information about Edward's expenses at Rhuddlan in 1281 and 1282, and the record <sup>18</sup> was published by the Society of Antiquaries in London in 1812. It describes how carpenters and masons were brought in from England to repair the castle and to make it fit for purpose as Edward's military HQ, the *Roll of Expenses* accounting for wages and materials down to the last penny. The nearby River Dee leads to Chester and as well as men and materials, ships were bringing all manner of 'necessaries' for Edward's use: *'To a certain sailor bringing the king's venison from Chester to Rothelan [Rhuddlan], for his wages – five shillings and eight pence'*.

Archers and crossbowmen were being delivered by the boat-load, along with infantry soldiers, with many heading onwards to Aberconwy and Caernarfon. There were also comings and goings of both Edward's queen and the royal daughters, Elizabeth and Joan, as recorded in their expenses for transportation. Of the more intriguing entries is one in particular: *'to a certain female spy, as a gift, one shilling'*. And further down the same list is a similar entry: *'to a certain female spy, to purchase her a house, as a gift, one pound'*. A remarkable gift of five pounds was given to a Ralph le Vavassour for bringing news *'of the taking of the castle Dolinthelein'*, this being the Welsh stronghold of Dolwyddelan. The foodstuffs listed in the *Roll of Expenses* is informative in the last item: *'eight pounds and a half of fennel'*. Evidently, Edward had a fondness for fennel seeds, and he would soon be needing their alleged courage-inducing effect in the battles that lay ahead. Alternatively it just improved his venison stew.

It is clear that the king was now hell-bent on a 'final solution' to the Welsh problem and that of Gwynedd in particular, and there would no longer be any scope for arranging terms for a peace deal. Such treaty settlements between the Welsh and the English had taken many forms in the past, some more unusual than others. For example, following warfare with King Edgar of Wessex in the late 900s, the vanquished Welsh ruler was obliged to *'yield him yearly, by way of tribute, 300 wolves; by means whereof, within the space of four years after, in England and Wales, might scarcely be found one wolf alive'*. <sup>19</sup> Even Edward himself had a problem with the Welsh wolves, as historic records noted: *'We find that formerly wolves came down from the mountains of Wales, which infected the neighbouring counties of England; for in the year 1281, king Edward gave a commission to one Peter Corbet, to destroy all the wolves he could find in the counties bordering upon Wales'*.<sup>20</sup> Wolves were to be the least of Longshanks' worries, with the Welsh dragon posing a far greater threat. The imposition on the Welsh by the Saxons of a 'wildlife management' treaty was as nothing compared to the settlement of 1277.

The Treaty of Aberconwy's terms had meant that when Llywelyn died he would be the last prince of Wales, the title thereafter belonging to the monarchs of England, and more particularly their eldest sons. This also left Dafydd in an intolerable position, having been denied his patrimony and with no hope of furthering the ancient royal dynasty of Gwynedd. A Welsh parliament had been held in the spring of 1282 and the rulers of Wales had joined Dafydd in declaring war on England. Robbed even of their dignity as nobles, there had seemed few options open to them. The Welsh forces devastated some of the English-controlled castles of the north and the uprising spread south, with Edward's commander of the army in South Wales, Gilbert de Clare, being heavily defeated in battle. Wales was ablaze with rebellion and on 10th April 1282 the king issued commands to the barons and bailiffs of the coastal towns in south-east England, ordering them to join him, *'well armed with their service due to the king, ready to set out thence with the king and his magnates in his expedition against Welsh rebels'*. On the 28th of the previous month Edward had been in Devizes, Wiltshire, from where he wrote to Canterbury imploring Archbishop Peckham to excommunicate the Welsh rebels wholesale. The end was nigh and Wales was ripe for the picking, but she was not going to be plucked from her ancestral tree without a fight.

By the early summer of 1282 Llywelyn could see little hope on the horizon, and his wife Eleanor had died giving birth to their daughter, Gwenllïan. A personal tragedy like this was probably the last straw – what had he got to lose? Had he a son the child could never be called a Prince of Wales, a birthright now denied by treaty to the royal family of Gwynedd. The great prince mounted his war horse and headed south with his



army. Underestimating England's noble enemy, Archbishop Peckham wrote to Llywelyn in November 1282 offering an estate in England worth £1,000, if only he would call an end to hostilities and '*place Snowdonia in the absolute, free and perpetual possession of the lord king*'. Dafydd was offered an all-expenses-paid trip to the Holy Land, provided he did not return from crusade without permission. Neither prince accepted these inducements to abandon their continuing fight for Welsh independence.

Edward was not too keen on Peckham's approach, but the king evidently made no moves to block such negotiations. Peckham was intent on controlling the religious life of the Welsh people, who had been regarded as '*barbarous and blasphemous*' by several of England's church leaders. The archbishop took a more compassionate stance for members of the Welsh clergy, even daring to rebuke Edward for hanging so many priests, whom the king believed were supporting the rebellion. Although Peckham was mainly a political mediator between the Welsh and the king, he probably saw his role as something of a personal crusade, given his elevated status in the church in England, as well as a certain Augustine-like impetus to bring the Celtic Church to heel. He wanted Celtic spiritual life firmly under Canterbury's controlling hand, just an arm's length from Rome.

Later Peckham was even advocating that children from Wales should be educated in England. That would have sent the Welsh language into terminal decline, eclipsing a whole cultural identity. Peckham's letter to Llywelyn exposes his overall agenda: '*We came to those parts [Wales] for the spiritual and temporal health of them [the Welsh] whom we have ever loved well [...] we desire and beseech them, for the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, that they would come to a unity with the English people, and to the peace of our lord the king, which we intend to procure them so well as we can*'. Illustrating the crusading zeal of this archbishop and his king, Peckham fired a provocative volley of words: '*We much lament to hear that the Welshmen be more cruel than Saracens*.' In his written reply Llywelyn launches a verbal counter-attack: '*We and our people were so oppressed, trodden under foot, spoiled, and brought to slavery by the king's officers, contrary to the forms of the peace concluded against justice, none otherwise than if we were Saracens or Jews*'.<sup>21</sup>

As one historian observed, when commenting on the post-war 'English Towns' established in Wales by Edward, '*the borough was limited to free Englishmen, Jews, like Welshmen, being forbidden all entrance*'.<sup>22</sup> Edward's own charter of 1284, granting free borough status to Rhuddlan specifically states that, '*Jews in the same borough at any time shall not tarry*'. His *Statute of Judaism* passed in 1275 provides us with an insight into this king's approach to Jewish people, as well as evoking memories of the horrors of the 20th-century: '*And every one of them [the Jews], that is past seven years of age, shall wear a badge, in form of two tables of yellow taffety [6x3ins/15x8cm] upon his upper garment; and every one that is past twelve years, shall also pay annually, to the king, at Easter, the sum of three pence, both men and women*'.<sup>23</sup>

The king's eagerness to extort every penny from the Jewish population of his realm had prompted him to write to the Bishop of Worcester on the 3rd of January 1278, advising the prelate to excommunicate anyone '*detaining the goods of Jews which ought to belong to the Crown*'. The royal coffers swelled with these ill-gotten gains, but it could now barely keep pace with the demands of his war chest, resulting in his extensive borrowing from Italian merchants. The king's military expenditure in Wales for the year 1284-85 alone topped a colossal £90,000, plunging the Crown into ever deeper debt. Edward needed to bring the conflict in Wales to a swift end.

## Guarding the Borderlands



*The old Norman bridge at Shrewsbury carried the road into Wales, its fortified appearance being a reminder of what was an ever-present threat across the border between Wales and England.*

ILLUSTRATION *The Antiquarian Repertory*, 1808.



## Llywelyn ap Gruffydd

“Let a speedy end be put to the incurable anguish of our spirits, since now there is no place to which we, miserable men, may flee. No spot where we can securely dwell. No friendly counsel. No safe retreat. No way by which we can escape our unhappy destiny.”





Early December 1282 found Llywelyn in Powys with his troops, and the medieval records suggest that he was drawn to the area by deception on the part of members of the powerful Mortimer family, with whom Llywelyn had been engaged in intermittent conflict since the 1250s. In what is certainly the most comprehensive study<sup>24</sup> of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, the author presents the evidence implicating the Mortimers in a plot. The *Chronicle of the Princes* says that the conspiracy against Llywelyn was hatched ‘*in the belfry at Bangor by his own men*’. Momentarily separated from his soldiers, Llywelyn was suddenly attacked and left for dead by a soldier named Stephen Francton, who simply rejoined the fray nearby, initially unaware of who his victim was. It was only after the local defeat of the Welsh troops that he returned to loot the body and realised the true significance of his action. It is said that the mortally wounded Llywelyn had begged a passing man-at-arms to fetch him a priest. Francton chopped off Llywelyn’s head as proof of his deed. He rinsed the gruesome trophy in a nearby stream, about which the *Chronicle of Adam of Usk* recorded a mysterious occurrence: ‘*The spring wherein the head of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, last prince of Wales, was washed after that it was cut off, and which is in the village of Builth, throughout a livelong day did flow in an unmixed stream of blood*’.<sup>25</sup>

It is said that the Welsh Cistercian monks took Llywelyn’s headless corpse and buried it beneath the high altar at Cwm Hir Abbey, north of where he died near the town of Builth. The place is known as Cilmeri and earlier still as Cefn y Bedd – meaning behind the grave. King Edward was in North Wales when the grisly prize of Llywelyn’s head was brought to him in December, and he wasted no time in regarding it as a symbolic portent of forthcoming and complete victory. The king arranged for this war trophy to be shown to his troops occupying Anglesey, where his great fleet was riding at anchor, his intention, presumably, being to boost the soldiers’ morale. Judging by what Edward did next, Llywelyn’s head was obviously the Christmas present he was hoping for, as suggested by the account in Holinshed’s chronicle: ‘*And the king sent it unto London, appointing that there should be an yule [ivy leaves] crown set upon it, in token that he was a prince, and so being adorned, a horseman carried it upon the end of his staff through Cheapside, holding it as he rode on high, that all men might see it, till he came to the tower, and there it was put aloft upon one of the highest turrets, remaining there a long time after. Thus was the prophecy fulfilled, which was told to him [Llywelyn] by an old woman taken for a soothsayer, of whom he required to know how he should speed in this war, whereunto she answered that he should boldly go forward in them, for he should ride with a crown on his head through Cheapside*’.



This inscribed slate slab commemorates Llywelyn at Cwm Hir Abbey. On the page opposite is pictured the 12-foot monolith erected in 1956 where the last prince of Wales fell in battle, near the mysterious stream and now holy well. An elegy was written at the time by the court poet, Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch, the extract quoted being from Warrington’s *History of Wales*, 1788.

The savage Welsh winter continued, as did the fighting, with Dafydd assuming – in full defiance of King Edward – the role and title of Prince of Wales. Pockets of resistance remained, with victories and defeats on both sides, but within a few months Dafydd was being hotly pursued, fleeing from one stronghold to the next. Dolwyddelan Castle had already fallen to the English army, as did others in Gwynedd like Castell y Bere, built by Llywelyn the Great in the 1220s. Rhuddlan Castle had remained in the hands of the king, and it was here, in March 1283, that Edward enacted what became known as the *Statutes of Rhuddlan*, carving up the ancient kingdoms of Wales into shires on the Anglo-Norman model and introducing sheriffs to keep the king’s peace. In future, the exchequer of Wales and the officers of the treasury were to operate from Chester in England. The purse strings were drawn as tight as a noose.



By the beginning of summer in 1283 much of Gwynedd was in the hands of Edward's massive army, and for the Welsh resistance seemed hopeless. Dafydd was on the run with his wife, Elizabeth Ferrers and their children, all of whom were hiding-out just south of the Gwynedd royal palace of Abergwyngregyn on the northern coast. Just as his brother Llywelyn had been betrayed by a conspiracy hatched in Bangor, so too did Dafydd fall victim to conspirators among his own people: *'Einion ab Ivor and Grono ab Dafydd y Penwyn, of Melai, who in the night of the 21st of June 1283, surprised the prince and his family, in a morass, into which they had fled for security.'*<sup>26</sup> The two Welshmen are said to have received thirty marks each and twenty head of cattle for their betrayal. Perhaps the choice of thirty reflected the amount Judas received for his betrayal of Christ (Matthew 26:15). Accompanied by English soldiers they apprehended Dafydd, who was seriously wounded in the ensuing struggle, and they also captured his younger son Owain. Both were taken to the king's war headquarters at Rhuddlan Castle, soon to be followed by Elizabeth Ferrers, a daughter named Gwladys, six illegitimate daughters of Dafydd and finally the infant Gwenllïan, the daughter of the late Llywelyn.

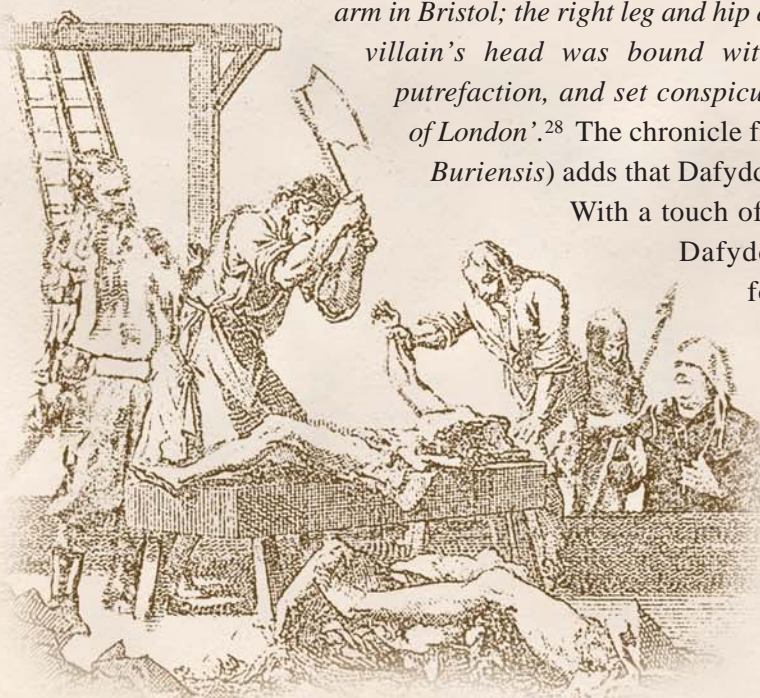
Having accepted gifted estates from Edward, Dafydd was now fully under the jurisdiction of the Crown and his Welsh royal pedigree would prove to be ineffective in aiding his defence. He was taken to Shrewsbury and tried for high treason in September, the verdict being a foregone conclusion. In an order (*Welsh Rolls* 28th June 1283) to Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Gloucester and others to attend the king at Shrewsbury, Edward expressed his anger and resentment towards Dafydd, whom he had *'received as an exile, nourished as an orphan, and endowed with lands, and cherished with clothing under his protection, placing him among the greater ones of his palace.'* These 'lands' included the Lordship of Hope in 1277, after Dafydd had sided with the English in the war against the Welsh, and it was here that he had built Caergwrle Castle in what is now Flintshire. Edward had even given Dafydd one hundred marks in November 1278 towards the construction costs, so it is little wonder that the king felt deeply aggrieved.

Dafydd and his steward were dragged through the streets of Shrewsbury and the steward, Mabadin, was *'torn asunder by horses; a punishment not unusual in England during the thirteenth century.'*<sup>27</sup> King Edward also made sure that Dafydd did not die at this point, since he had subsequent and more savage plans for the prince he saw as a convicted traitor. The king's cruel orders were carried out to the letter on the 3rd October 1283, as described in horrific detail in the *Chronicle of Lanercost*: *'David himself was first drawn as a traitor; then hanged as a thief; thirdly, he was beheaded alive, and his entrails burnt as an incendiary and homicide; fourthly, his limbs were cut into four parts as the penalty of a rebel, and exposed in four of the ceremonial places in England as a spectacle; to wit – the right arm with a ring on the finger in York; the left arm in Bristol; the right leg and hip at Northampton; the left leg at Hereford. But the villain's head was bound with iron, lest it should fall to pieces from putrefaction, and set conspicuously upon a long spear-shaft for the mockery of London.'*<sup>28</sup> The chronicle from the abbey of Bury St. Edmunds (*Chronica Buriensis*) adds that Dafydd's head was also displayed on London Bridge.

With a touch of irony and no small amount of black humour,

Dafydd may have had the 'last laugh' afterall,

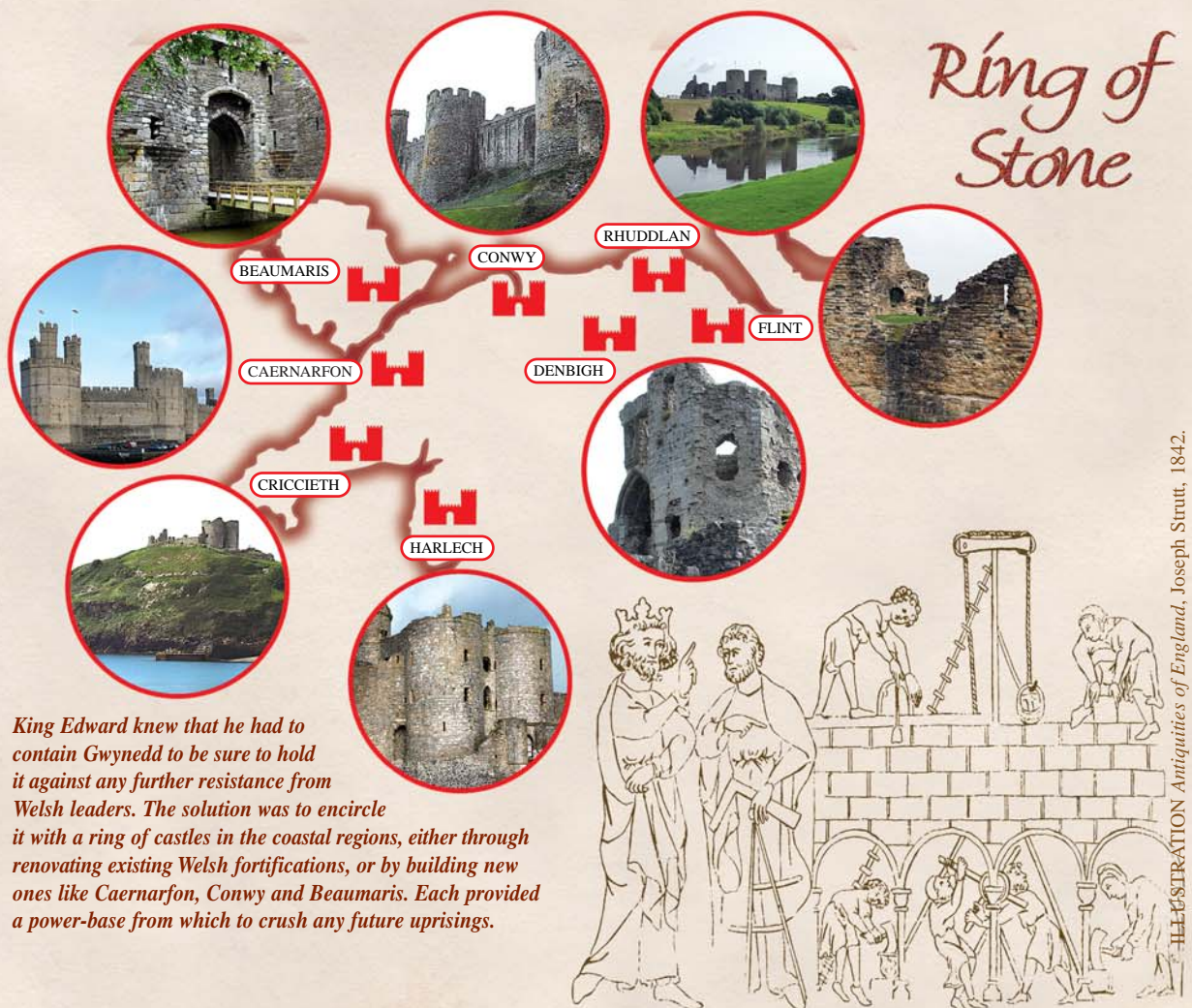
following this barbaric execution of a Welsh prince: *'There is a tradition extant, that when David's [Dafydd's] heart was thrown into the fire, one of Edward I's courtiers was ordered to superintend this part of the sentence. He took his sword and turned it in the fire; the heart being very much swollen with heat, caused it to explode, and it flew with great force from the fire, and struck the courtier in the eye, which blinded him for life.'*<sup>29</sup>





So ended the tragic days of the brothers Llywelyn and Dafydd of the royal line of Gwynedd, their heads being displayed on the Tower of London from where their father had fallen – perhaps pushed – to his death in 1244. These grisly exhibits remained as a reminder to all that King Edward of England would tolerate no opposition to his tyrannical rule and expansionist ambitions. Gwynedd appeared to be firmly in the king's grip, although another revolt did arise in 1294-5 led by Madog ap Llywelyn, the son of Llywelyn ap Maredudd who was related to the soon to be extinguished royal family of Aberffraw. Their successes included ambushing King Edward, who was obliged to retreat to Conwy Castle, losing his baggage train in the process. Eventually Madog was captured and sent to London and imprisonment for life. South Wales had also risen in rebellion against the king, the Welsh forces being led by Rhys ap Maredudd during 1287-88. He too was eventually captured and executed for treason at York in 1292. Over the next few decades various rebellions continued to arise in Wales, but each was ultimately crushed by an England determined to hold sway over those western lands of the Britons. Following these inevitably short-lived revolts, the king imposed punitive and crippling taxes on the Welsh, a dispiriting consequence for a nation which only sought freedom from tyranny and subjugation.

Edward's castle development programme in Wales now went into overdrive. He demolished Gwynedd's sacred abbey at Aberconwy on the North Wales coast, so as to build his castle and walled town of Conwy, evicting the Cistercian monks, who were obliged to start from scratch further south in the Conwy Valley at a place called Maenan. King Edward obviously had no qualms about demolishing religious buildings to meet his military needs. In 1300 he ordered the mayor and community of Newcastle upon Tyne to accommodate the Carmelite monks in the town, because he was going to destroy their priory buildings to make way for new fortifications during his wars with Scotland, yet another nation he sought to incorporate into his empire.

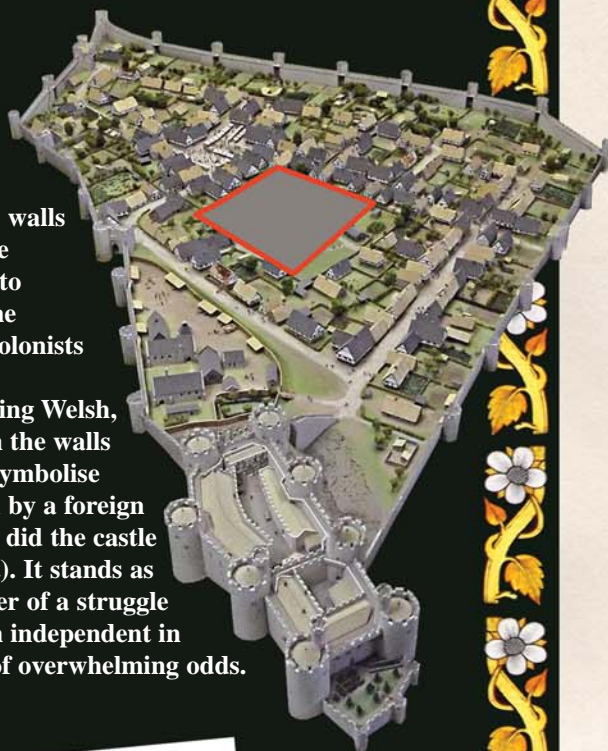




When viewing the model (right) of King Edward's walled town of Conwy, it is clear that the site of Aberconwy Abbey (red-lined area) was not in the way of his construction plans. The king's motives for demolishing this sacred building were simply to eradicate the dynastic presence of Gwynedd's rulers. King Edward was all too aware of the potency inherent in relics and several of Gwynedd's kings and princes were entombed in the abbey.



The town walls (left) were intended to protect the English colonists from the surrounding Welsh, for whom the walls came to symbolise dominion by a foreign power, as did the castle itself (left). It stands as a reminder of a struggle to remain independent in the face of overwhelming odds.



The parish church (below) retains vestiges of the abbey's church fabric.





Archbishop Peckham vehemently opposed the setting up of the new Cistercian abbey at Maenan in a letter to Edward, dated the 14th of June 1284, where he expressed '*a very great horror of the approach of the foresaid monks [...] they are the hardest neighbours*'. Peckham goes on to declare: '*For where they plant their foot, they destroy towns, take away tithes, and curtail by their privileges all the power of prelacy*'. Peckham was at Rhuddlan when he wrote this excited letter to the king, who dismissed it outright and carried on with his relocation plan. This archbishop's actions in England clearly showed a distinct bias towards the Mendicant Orders. Evidently, Peckham had little regard for the Cistercians, who had enjoyed a particularly strong relationship with rulers in Wales. Prior to the war Edward himself had founded Vale Royal Abbey in Cheshire, a Cistercian institution, but by 1290 he said that he wanted nothing more to do with them, suggesting that his own experiences during the war in Wales had tainted his view of that particular religious order.

Did the king really need that site of Aberconwy Abbey, or was he simply intending to recycle the masonry for his major building plans? He had dismantled the Gwynedd rulers' great hall at Conwy and transported the building materials to his castle project in Caernarfon. The real motive for the abbey's 'dissolution' is more likely to have been that Edward wanted to destroy what could so easily have become a shrine to his enemies, the Welsh elite of Gwynedd, several of whose ancestors were entombed in the abbey. Edward had no intention of allowing Aberconwy Abbey to become a spiritual focus and rallying point for further resistance to his plans to render Wales a dominion of England once and for all.

What state Aberconwy Abbey was in before Edward demolished it was probably not great, since it had already suffered much in the current war, as the 19th-century *History and Antiquities of the Town of Aberconwy* explains: '*But in the return back, our [English] soldiers being too covetous and greedy of plunder, among other sacrilegious and profane actions, spoiled the abbey of Aberconwy, and burnt all the books and other choice utensils belonging to it. The Welsh being distracted at these irreligious practices, got together in great number, and in a desperate manner setting upon the English, killed a great number of them*'.<sup>30</sup> The English troops under the command of Edward's father Henry had previously trashed the abbey in 1245, during an unsuccessful attempt to subdue Gwynedd, even burning the buildings and robbing the monks of food provisions before retreating back to England.

In a papal letter from Martin IV, dated the 26th of May 1284, this pope absolved King Edward of his war crimes in Wales, at the same time as congratulating the monarch on his decision to go on crusade again. The king never made it and the pope pestered him for cash payment in lieu. In June the pope issued a bull granting power to the bishops of Worcester and Bangor to give absolution to those individuals who had '*committed homicide of religious persons*' during the war in Wales. No doubt the king felt that God was on his side, as he forwarded the papal bull to the bishops from Llywelyn's former palace at Aber Garth Celyn, requiring its implementation at the earliest opportunity. Edward is recorded (*Littere Wallie* – Exchequer Records) as making compensation payments for damage to various ecclesiastical institutions in Wales, each of which had suffered during the warfare: £250 for Bangor, £160 for Valley Crucis and so on. The king had also issued a grant (*Welsh Rolls* June-July 1284) of Aberconwy Abbey's surviving church's (today's Conwy parish church) income from tithes and offerings to the abbot and monks of the new abbey at Maenan. He was, however, insistent that the church be '*served by two fit and honest English chaplains*'.

The hold over northern Wales was to be facilitated by Edward's ring of stone that encircled Gwynedd. In January 1285 the king was in Bristol and he issued instructions for money due to the Crown to be brought over from Ireland to Caernarfon, '*for the walling of certain towns and castles in Wales*', as recorded in the *Patent Rolls* for that year. By September of the same year Edward had agreed a new appointment to the vacant bishopric of York, a condition being that the financial benefits gained should be applied '*to the construction of castles in Wales*'. By having well equipped soldiers in the form of castle garrisons, the king believed he could act more swiftly to confront localised rebellions, rather than mobilising an army in England and losing time through its transportation into Wales. Also each castle could be supplied by sea, thereby avoiding the risk of land-based supply lines being cut off by the Welsh. It proved to be an effective military strategy.



Whether the living or the dead, Edward had little regard for either the Welsh or their holy places. His next target after the destruction of Aberconwy Abbey was in Anglesey. Llanfaes Friary was where Llywelyn the Great's wife Joan lay buried, as did also Eleanor the wife of Llywelyn the Last. Both women were relatives of Edward, but neither resting soul could inhibit the king's plans for Wales. At that time the township of Llanfaes was a trading centre and a key port for crossing to the island from the mainland. When work began towards 1300 on Edward's new castle at Beaumaris (Norman-French for 'fair marsh'), the local population was evicted wholesale by the king, and many were resettled at the opposite end of Anglesey at what became known as Newborough. Founded in 1303, this new borough was located at one of the former royal courts (Welsh *Llys*) of Gwynedd known as Rhosyr, the location sometimes being given in the texts as Rhosfair, with the fair/mair element indicating the mother of Jesus. The fate of the buildings here followed that of the nearby palace at Aberffraw, the timbers of which were removed in 1317 to use for repair work at Caernarfon Castle.

Gradually all trace of the magnificence of Gwynedd's royal households disappeared into the decay of memory, superseded by the edifices of the English Crown and its colonial administrators. In 1285 Edward issued a charter, dated January the 2nd at Bristol: *'Inasmuch as the land of Wales, which since no short time was subject by feudal law to the kings of England, is now united to the king's dominion not only by power but by way of justice'*.<sup>31</sup> The king's 'justice' for the Welsh lay in the hands of Reginald de Grey at Chester, who had previously threatened to behead any Welsh envoys being sent to Edward, seeking legal redress for the many losses and injustices they and others had experienced at the hands of this representative of the Crown. Several directly approached Archbishop Peckham, in whose archived correspondence we find despair as they inform him that they now considered themselves *'free from the oath made before God to the lord king'*. Even the Rood of Chester could no longer bind these lost souls.

Edward's approach to the bloodline of Gwynedd was as ruthlessly efficient as it had been to its royal and ecclesiastical buildings – extermination. On the 11th of November 1283 the king wrote a letter while staying in Ludlow, addressed to the prior and prioress of Alvingham Monastery in Lincolnshire. While pointing out that he *'did not feel bound to do much'*<sup>32</sup> for the children of Llywelyn and Dafydd, he nevertheless sought their admission to a conventual life. Llywelyn's daughter Gwenllïan was but an infant at the time, and she was delivered to Sempringham Priory, where she remained until her death in 1337 as a nun in her mid-fifties. Edward did check up on things while she was there, presumably anxious to ensure there was no likelihood of escape and dynastic breeding. He issued an order (*Patent Rolls* 2nd September 1289) to the judge, Thomas de Normanville to visit Sempringham and report back. Dafydd's daughter Gwladys shared a similar fate to Gwenllïan, having been installed in another of the Gilbertine houses in Lincolnshire, Sixle Priory where she died in 1336.

As to Dafydd's sons Owain and Llywelyn, they had been taken to Bristol under heavy guard shortly before their father was horribly executed at Shrewsbury. One of Dafydd's butchered body parts was also sent to Bristol for display, as a visible deterrent to anyone else considering treason. The accounts<sup>33</sup> of the constable of Bristol Castle reveal that Llywelyn died a prisoner in 1287, the circumstances of his death being unknown. He was buried in the grounds of the Dominican Priory of Bristol, the funeral costs to the Crown amounting to nearly four pounds. His younger brother Owain, who was born around 1275, is last recorded as being still alive and in custody in 1325, but no mention thereafter. There is, however, a poignant record from 1305 when a rumour circulated that a plot to help him escape was being hatched. The king's response (*Close Rolls* 20th October 1305) was to instruct the constable to keep the boy in a cage at night.

A heart-rending letter<sup>34</sup> survives from this time, written in French and sent to Edward from the young Owain, and in it he begins by saying that he had been imprisoned in Bristol Castle since he was seven years old, because of *'his father's trespass'* against the king. He goes on to ask if he may be permitted to go out of his cell to play within the castle walls. Owain's petition to the king then pleads that the constable of the castle does not provide him with sufficient food and clothing, and he enquires as to whether the payments



from the king for his upkeep could be paid directly to him, or to someone *'who may be more tender towards him than the constable'*. Edward's response to this consists of a note, written in Latin by a court scribe in the margin of the document, saying that Owain's needs are being met and enquiries should be made as to who facilitated this letter. Whoever it was they were unlikely to have been treated tenderly by this king.

That just leaves the remaining two brothers of the late princes, Owain and Rhodri. The latter appears to have ended his days in England around 1315, although mystery surrounds much of his life and fate. Perhaps the king felt that Rhodri posed no threat, since he had taken himself out of the line of Gwynedd's succession in an agreement with Llywelyn in the 1270s. As to Owain 'Goch' (Welsh for 'Red'), whose life seems to have been one of near continual confinement, probably including years in Dolbadarn Castle, he appears to have died in unknown circumstances around 1282, the year in which Llywelyn was slain in battle near Builth.

Just as this chapter closes on the Gwynedd princes on the Tower, so another opens and with it the *Welsh Cross* finally emerges onto the pages of recorded history. It was a 'souvenir' of his domination of Wales by sheer military might, and yet it became Edward's most treasured relic, a personal talisman for victory that he took on his next empire-building expedition – Scotland. Here too his victims of war were ruthlessly treated: he kept the wives of Scotland's earls in iron cages, following the capture of Kildrummy Castle in 1306. Edward I is often described by historians as 'the English Justinian' on account of his enactment of so many laws, in common with the 6th-century Byzantine Emperor, Justinian I. Was Edward a just king or just a typically medieval king? Perhaps the chronicler Matthew Paris could answer that question where he describes how the king *'was passing through a peaceful part of the country at a time of peace, [when] a young man met him, and Edward, without any pretext for killing or maiming the young man being given him, ordered one of his ears to be cut off, and one of his eyes to be pulled out, which was done, though contrary to every rule of justice'*.

**Dafydd's sons  
Owain and Llywelyn were imprisoned  
by King Edward in Bristol Castle, where Llywelyn  
died in 1287. The young man was buried at the  
Dominican Priory (right). Today's visitors relax in  
the priory's grounds, unaware of the tragic story  
of the prince of Gwynedd who lies  
beneath the earth.**

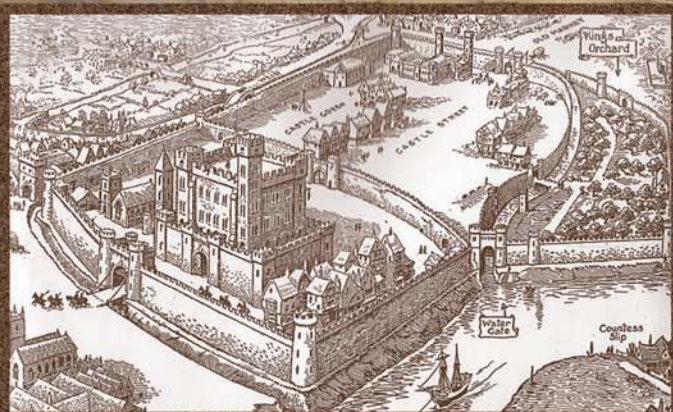


ILLUSTRATION – Bristol Castle by F. G. Lewin (1922)











he treasured cross – to the victors the spoils of war. In the year 1283 the holy and royal treasures of Gwynedd fell into the hands of Edward I, as described in the *Chronicle of Lanercost*: the king ‘possessed himself of the ancient and secret treasures of that people, dating, as is believed, from the time of Arthur; among which he found a most beautiful piece of the Holy Cross, carved into a portable cross, which was the glory of their dominion [...] The Welsh had been accustomed to call it, after the fashion of their own language “Crosnaith”’. The Welsh Cross finally shines forth from the contemporary records of the Middle Ages, with the annals of the Cistercian Abbey of Waverley in Surrey describing it as ‘a portion of the Cross of our Lord, large and precious’, while the Winchester annalist says, ‘a great piece of our Lord’s Cross, which is called in Welsh, Crosseneyeh’.<sup>1</sup> All of these monastic writers are simply doing their best to express the Welsh phrase Croes Naid, which refers to the large piece of the True Cross, rather than to some otherwise nameless artefact that contained this precious relic.

Here we can again appreciate that problem centred on the nomenclature of the *Welsh Cross*, while it was in English hands and recorded in texts from the Middle Ages and later periods. The issue was raised in the Introduction to this book, and if we briefly look at the Reverend Thomas Richards’ Welsh dictionary from 1839, we can more readily comprehend how non-Welsh writers would have struggled with these words. For example, the definition of a word of similar appearance like ‘croesanaeth’ is given as ‘a scurrilous jest, ribaldry’. Obviously that word has nothing to do with a relic of the True Cross, but we can grasp from it the challenge that confronted many writers down the ages, especially the medieval ones writing in Latin and sometimes transcribing from Anglo-Norman French documents, or even recording ineptly spoken references to the *Welsh Cross*.

Among the items seized from Gwynedd’s treasury there was what was described as King Arthur’s ‘crown’, ‘the object of diligent search down to the late Middle Ages [...] In the year 1283, according to the “Waverley Annals,” the crown of the celebrated King Arthur (who was long held in the greatest reverence by the Welsh) was offered, together with other precious jewels, to Edward I’.<sup>2</sup> The *Waverley Annals* demonstrate a masterful grasp of understatement by observing that this artefact was handed over ‘unwillingly’.

Before taking a closer look at this piece of regalia, it is worth observing that the Reverend Thomas Smart – encountered at the end of Chapter Four of this book – also mentions another piece of Arthuriana. In his book on the *Genealogy of the Descendents of the Prichards* (1868), Smart says that, ‘the names of the knights [of the Round Table] were engraved on the model of the table, which formed part of the British [i.e. Welsh] regalia’. There is no reference to this particular item of Arthuriana in contemporary records of Welsh items seized during Edward’s conquest, and this king would not, given his personal enthusiasm for Arthur, have overlooked such a desirable treasure. And nor does Smart cite his source for this seemingly unique reference, so it remains something of a mystery.

Returning to the subject of Arthur’s so-called ‘crown’, there does not appear to be a description of the object in the English chronicles and annals, so we have no way of precisely determining what it looked like. However, a clue may be available to us in the Welsh *Chronicle of the Princes* in an entry under the 870s, saying that the Welsh kings and princes prior to this period ‘wore only golden bands’. This would appear to have been the prevailing regal style in Europe at the time, since the king of the Franks, Charlemagne (748–814) was entombed in Aachen Cathedral wearing ‘a diadem, or circlet of gold’. By the 11th-century the head of the household at Gwynedd’s royal court is recorded as having ‘the office imposed upon him and his male heirs to tie the bandlet round the Prince of Aberffraw’s head at his coronation’.<sup>3</sup> In *The Dream of Macsen Wledig* Eudaf is described as having ‘his hair bound with a golden diadem’, meaning a head-band of some description – a ‘bandlet’.

The 13th-century *Annals of Tewkesbury* provides more information on the evolution of Welsh royal headgear. Dafydd ap Llywelyn attended the great council of King Henry III at Gloucester in May 1240, there to pay homage and fealty to England’s monarch as the Prince of Wales. Henry knighted him on that occasion and invested him with the territory his father Llywelyn had held as of right. The *Tewkesbury* annalist



# Gwynedd's Garlonde



Like other elements of Greek culture, the Romans adopted the use of garlands as headgear, particularly as portrayed on their coinage like the above detail, showing a coin of Magnus Maximus. The majority of imperial coins portray the emperors wearing such items as laurel wreaths, especially popular with the military, as were garlands of oak leaves. Consuls and senators also wore ones made of olive leaves. These were the predominant types before and after the 4th-century era of Maximus, but it was in his time that the imperial coins of the likes of Valentinian I, Gratian and Valens displayed a more floral style, a garland as we see them today. Given the influential role that Maximus played among the leaders of the Britons, it is quite probable that the 'garlonde' worn by Dafydd ap Llywelyn at the ceremony in 1240 had remained an ancient tradition in Gwynedd.

recording the event describes Dafydd as wearing headgear 'called the garlonde, the insignia of North Wales'.<sup>4</sup>

Given Arthur's period of the 500s, we may infer from these historic sources that this king of the Britons would have worn a 'garland' or diadem of a decorative nature, but not a crown, or its lesser counterpart a coronet, such as we picture these objects today. Whether the artefact acquired by Edward was inscribed to identify it as having once belonged to Arthur, the records do not say, and there is another problematic issue relating to this particular Gwynedd treasure. The antiquary and churchman White Kennett describes it as a 'leaden crown' in his book of 1695, although he does not claim to have seen the object himself, merely what he had been told by others. The thorough and comprehensive inventory taken before the English Crown Jewels were destroyed in 1649, during the era of the new republic under Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), makes no mention of this, or indeed any other specifically Welsh regalia. It is clear from this record that the Welsh treasures seized by Edward I did not survive up to the 17th-century, as some have imagined. The manuscripts, dated the 13th of August 1649, are in the collection of the Society of Antiquaries of London, and this documentary evidence was published in 1806 and again in 1972.

From the twelfth year (1284-5) of his reign, Edward's *Jewel Account* shows that a piece of regal headgear from amongst the Welsh treasures was handed over to a goldsmith named

Matthew de Columbariis, who covered the object in gold plate at the king's expense. The *Jewel Account* does not, however, refer to it in connection with King Arthur, but the possibility remains.

Another piece of Arthuriana was kept at Westminster Abbey at this time. It comprised a damaged piece of sealing wax, bearing the imprint of Arthur's own signet ring, the image including a simple portrait of this king with a beard. That it was still at Westminster in the 16th-century is confirmed by the antiquary John Leland (1503-1552), and also by his Welsh contemporary, Sir John Price (c.1502-1555). Another of their contemporaries, John Rastell (c.1475-1536), was told that the seal was once attached to a charter, granting rights to the abbey by King Arthur himself, although in his literary patchwork of history, *The Pastyme of People* (1529) Rastell dismisses it as 'a thing feigned of late'. The abbey that we see today has undergone several major transformations during the Middle Ages, and a Benedictine monk called Sulcard, who flourished in the 11th-century, asserted that the original church was founded in the 7th-century. As with many other monastic charters – like those elevating Glastonbury's status – the authenticity recipe may require a pinch of salt.



A number of writers have suggested – without any evidence – that King Edward I may have been installed in his tomb at Westminster Abbey wearing Arthur's 'crown', and it may be worth examining this claim more closely. With their usual high level of curiosity, several antiquaries, led by the highly respected Sir Joseph Ayloffe (1708-1781), managed to get permission to open Edward's tomb in May 1774. Watched closely by the abbey's Dean, the lid was raised to reveal the royally-robed corpse, much to the fascination of all those present. Ayloffe's report of their findings appeared in *Archaeologia*, the journal of London's Society of Antiquaries in 1775, and Ayloffe noted the following about Edward's crown: '*On the head of the corpse [...] is an open crown or fillet of tin, or latton [thin sheet brass], charged on its upper edge with trefoils, and gilt with gold [...] The shape and form of the crown correspond with the representation of those on the broad-seal of this king*'.<sup>5</sup> What is meant by the phrase 'open crown' is illustrated in a late 13th-century manuscript in the British Library (*Cotton Vitellius AXIII*), depicting Edward I, and the drawing reproduced on the right shows the 'trefoils' referred to by Ayloffe in his description.

The use of the trefoil design feature alone shows that the object was medieval, since it was a gothic motif from centuries after King Arthur's time. However, that does not preclude the possibility that it was originally Arthur's diadem and that Edward had simply had it embellished to accord with contemporary design taste. It may even have been the handiwork of the goldsmith Matthew de Columbariis, as mentioned in the *Jewel Account* of 1284-5. It remains an open question until and if the tomb is ever opened again, when modern metal analysis techniques could tell us more. When it was opened by the antiquaries in 1774, it seems one of them was rather 'light-fingered', as gleefully noted in Cunningham's visitors' guide to Westminster Abbey, published in 1842: '*In the act of closing up the relics of royalty, there was found wanting an entire fore-finger of Edward I; and as the body was perfect when opened, a murmur of dissatisfaction was spreading*'. It appears that one esteemed antiquary was thinking too much of desirable acquisitions for his collection of 'curiosities'.

Along with most of his contemporary nobles, Edward I was captivated by the Arthurian Romances, which were so popular throughout Europe at the time. In 1278 Edward and his queen arrived at Glastonbury, along with sundry nobles and clerics. Edward was intent on seeing for himself the alleged remains of Arthur and Guinevere, which the monks said they had found buried there. In the evening the king ordered that Arthur's sepulchre should be opened, and the bones found were said to have been of 'remarkable size', a point that may have chimed with Edward himself, nicknamed 'Longshanks' on account of his lengthy legs. What was claimed to be Arthur's skull was examined and found to have several cut marks, thought to indicate the probable cause of death. The next day Edward wrapped the bones in precious cloth and returned them to the chests in which they were said to have been found, ordering that the sepulchre should now be positioned before the abbey's great altar. The skulls, however, were to be kept on view for the benefit of pilgrims, who no doubt contributed handsomely to Glastonbury's coffers for a quick peek at these highly venerated relics. A touch was probably extra and a kiss even more.

Edward probably watched these proceedings with mixed feelings, but with a certain amount of satisfaction in knowing that this 'once and future' king of the Britons (i.e. the Welsh) was now very unlikely

## Edward's Crown



FROM Strutt's *Regal and Ecclesiastical Antiquities*, 1842.

This illustration, taken from a contemporary 13th-century manuscript, provides evidence of the type of crown with which King Edward I was entombed in the abbey. It is clearly not of a design that would have been worn in the time of King Arthur and his knights.



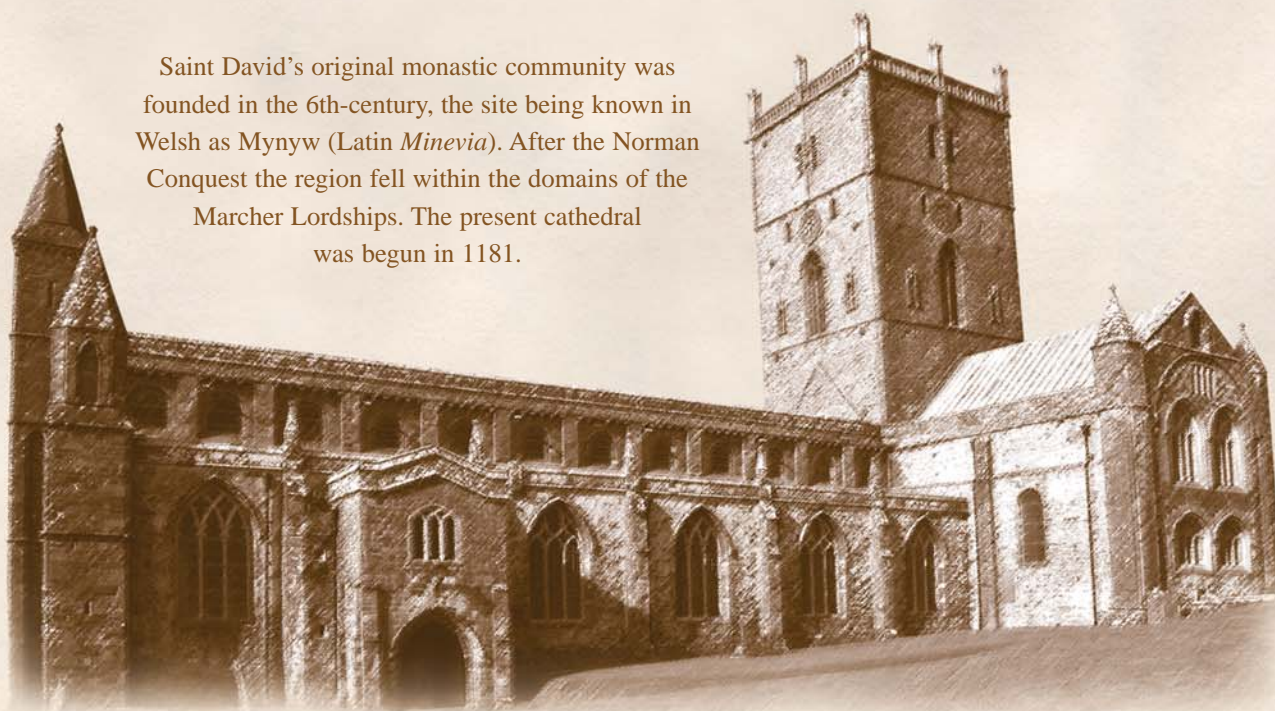


to return to aid Wales in its hour of need. The Round Table now in Winchester Castle is believed to have been the manufactured product of Edward I's enthusiasm for all things Arthurian, and it probably dates to around the 1290s. Its present painted appearance, including the Tudor Rose, derives from the much later time of Henry VIII (1491-1547). Arthur remained a firm favourite for the heroic literary genre and Hollywood perpetuates his mystique to the present day, fulfilling perhaps his prophetic role as forever belonging to the future.

Uncertainty surrounds the ultimate fate of Arthur's so-called crown. There is, however, a revealing statement in a medieval chronicle that rather suggests some of the Welsh treasures may have disappeared during the reign of the king's son, Edward II, who became king in 1307. The disappearance was due to its removal by the young king's favourite, Piers Gaveston, whom we are told '*went into the king's treasury in the Abbey of Westminster and took the table of gold, with the trestles of the same, and many other rich jewels that some time were the noble King Arthur's, and took them to a merchant called Aymery of Friscombande, for he should bear them over the sea into Gascony: and they come never again after; wherefore it was great loss unto this land*'.<sup>6</sup> Gaveston was from Gascony, so it would appear that some of the treasures from Gwynedd may have ended up in this one-time English territory of France in the early 1300s. The *Welsh Cross* definitely remained in England and this Gascon knight was to have a challenging encounter with it, as we shall discover. Gaveston's dipping into his king's resources was summed up by one historian at the beginning of the 20th-century: '*He looked too closely after the financial interests of his Gascon kinsfolk [...] with castles, lands, treasures and churches in Gascony*'.<sup>7</sup> The chronicler of the 14th-century, Walter of Guisborough, reckoned Gaveston sent abroad treasure to the value of £100,000 – several millions in today's money.

The chronicle *Flores Historiarum* described the *Welsh Cross* in the war booty thus: '*A large portion of the cross of the Lord, which, in the language of the Welsh, is called Croizneth [another spelling variation], was given up, with many other famous relics*'. Among these relics was '*the head of Saint David*'<sup>8</sup> (Welsh *Dewi Sant*), as mentioned in the text originally attributed to Florence of Worcester. The 6th-century David is the patron saint of Wales and his shrine is located at the 12th-century Saint David's Cathedral (pictured below), Pembrokeshire, the site of a monastic community in the founder's era. Glastonbury Abbey also claimed in the Middle Ages that they had David's relics, along with many others. In 1275 a new shrine had been constructed in Wales, and the saint's relics were housed in a portable casket, or reliquary, housed on the stone base of the shrine itself.

Saint David's original monastic community was founded in the 6th-century, the site being known in Welsh as Mynyw (Latin *Minevia*). After the Norman Conquest the region fell within the domains of the Marcher Lordships. The present cathedral was begun in 1181.

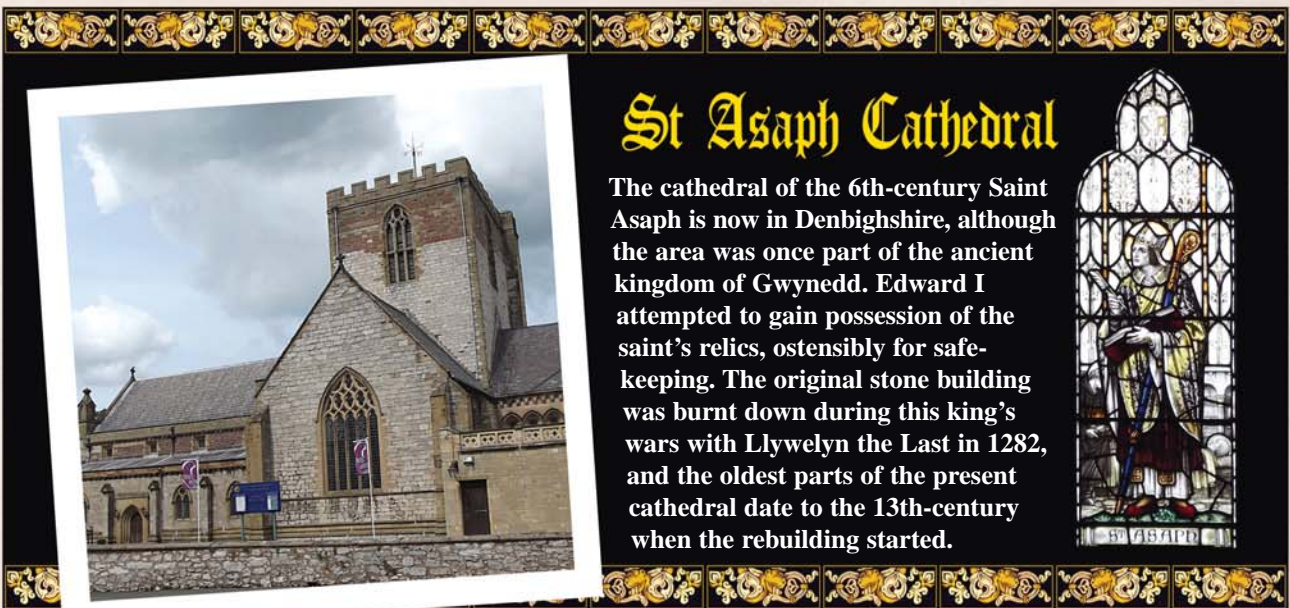




On Sunday 26th November 1284 Edward and his queen visited Saint David's shrine in South Wales, where the king was attending to his military and civil affairs, before going on to Bristol to spend Christmas. The *Welsh Annals* (*Annales Cambriae*) uses the Latin phrase '*causa peregrinationis*' to indicate that Edward and his queen were on a pilgrimage to Saint David's shrine. Perhaps Edward 'acquired' Saint David's relic during that visit, since he gave £121.8s.4d. towards the new shrine. During the Reformation of Henry VIII's time, the staunchly Protestant Bishop Barlow (episcopate 1536-48) stripped the shrine of its precious stones and confiscated the saintly relics. An inventory from 1536 also shows that '*a bone of S. David's arme*'<sup>9</sup> was found in Reading Abbey, along with sundry bits of anatomy from other saints. This abbey is also recorded as having two pieces of the 'Holy Cross', when in 1538 a John London reported the fact to Henry VIII's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell (c.1485-1540), during the confiscation of relics and the like.

It would not be an exaggeration to describe Edward I as a zealous relic collector. He was, however, most discriminating and only selected the best for himself. Relics with the greatest status – and therefore potency – were his particular choice. For centuries relics were the preferred object on which to swear an oath. A relic of Saint David would certainly be well worth adding to the king's growing collection, especially since the saint's shrine had been elevated in status in 1123, when pope Calixtus II granted a papal privilege on that particular location in South Wales. This pope declared that two pilgrimages to it were worth one to Rome, and three to Saint David's shrine were the 'spiritual equivalent' of one journey to Jerusalem itself. As with the Black Rood of Scotland, prized relics from Wales, including the *Welsh Cross*, would certainly bolster King Edward's growing sense of his expanding dominions.

The acquisitive and some say 'pious' Edward would probably have had little difficulty in justifying the removal of a Saint David relic from war-torn Wales, if only for 'safe-keeping' in London. He had after all contributed generously to the new shrine. Edward showed a similar interest in the relics of the 6th-century Saint Asaph, on that occasion in North Wales. The saint's remains were in the cathedral church (pictured below) named after him, and in a letter, probably dated from 1281, the king proposed transferring the relics from there to his war headquarters at Rhuddlan Castle, the seemingly worthy pretext being to keep them safe from becoming the victims of strife. The king's rescue attempt was apparently unsuccessful and after the war the Bishop of St Asaph found himself in some challenging circumstances, mainly through the withholding of tithes and customs previously due to his bishopric. This income deficit stemmed from the fact that the king had induced English settlers into the area, with a declaration that they could live there rent free for the next decade. It was a colonisation policy that was implemented elsewhere in post-war Wales, inevitably producing widespread discontent among the now conquered Welsh people.

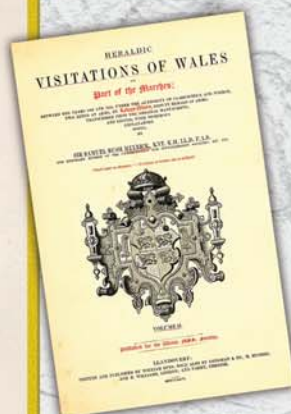




Information about Edward's portable relic collection is contained in documents from 1307: 'It is interesting to find in the Inventory taken after the King's death at Burgh on Sands [Cumbria in July 1307] mention of a silver casket bearing the figure of St. Paul (ymagine S'ci Pauli); another casket contained relics of several saints, amongst which was an arm (brachium) of St. David'.<sup>10</sup> Other items in Edward's death inventory included the 'Crux Neyghe' – the Welsh Cross again – the cup of Saint Thomas of Canterbury and the Black Rood (*Nigram Crucem*) of Scotland. The Scots' rood was inventoried as 'made of gold with golden chains in a chest, wooden within, and gilded with silver without'. There was also the 'Crux Sancte Elene de Scotia' – the Cross of Saint Helen of Scotland. The entry in the Latin inventory for this item simply says it was 'fashioned with gold and gemstones, in a certain covering of wood and leather'. The name attached would suggest another relic of the True Cross, and it had been seized from among the treasures of King Alexander III of Scotland. As it was contained in a purse bearing the arms of a French monarch, it had obviously been a gift to the royal family of Scotland, before Edward pillaged Edinburgh Castle during his conquest attempts north of the border.

In an entry under 1284, the *Flores Historiarum* records that, 'Alphonso, the king's eldest son, coming to Westminster, offered up a certain ornament of gold, which had formerly belonged to Llywelyn, prince of Wales, with other jewels also'. This 'certain ornament' was Llywelyn's 'coronet', according to an 18th-century account of Westminster Abbey by John Dart.<sup>11</sup> Although the evidence is extremely vague, it has been suggested that this artefact was still extant in the 16th-century, when what were described as 'Heraldic Visitations' were being undertaken between 1586 and 1597, including in Wales where they continued to 1613. The main purpose was to clarify and confirm the heraldry in use at the time, so as to formalise records and establish

## A Welsh Crown?



In the *Heraldic Visitations of Wales and Part of the Marches* by Lewys Dwnn (c.1550-1616) it is suggested that the coronet pictured on the top of the elaborate motif on the title page was the one that belonged to Prince Llywelyn, taken by King Edward I from the regalia of Wales in the 1280s. Others have since argued that it was probably one made for later English princes of Wales for their investiture. Even allowing for artistic interpretation, the reproduction below of the seal of a later Edward as Prince of Wales – who was to become the uncrowned Edward V (1470-c.1483) – clearly resembles the one shown in Dwnn's book. The son of Edward IV (1442-1483), this twelve year-old boy and his younger brother are said to have been murdered in the Tower of London by the Duke of Gloucester, who then became the notorious King Richard III.



This 15th-century seal shows the ostrich feathers that became associated to the present day with the insignia of the English princes of Wales, supported here by heraldic lions.

ILLUSTRATION *Archaeologia* volume XX, 1824.



# English Coronet?



ILLUSTRATION  
Francis Sandford, *A Genealogical History of the Kings of England and Monarchs of Great Britain*, 1677.

On the 13th of May 1343 King Edward III invested his son, the so-called Black Prince, with the title of Prince of Wales, the event taking place during a parliament at Westminster, when the prince was presented with a *circlet*, a gold ring and a silver rod. He is pictured above in his commemorative official seal as Prince of Wales, and it is clear from the detail of the image that no 'coronet', as such, was involved in the ceremony – simply a circlet or headband as illustrated above. As this event took place only some sixty years after King Edward I had seized the royal Welsh regalia from Gwynedd, it is quite plausible that it was the item referred to as the '*garlonde, the insignia of North Wales*', which would have been perceived as appropriate for this ceremony of 1343.

Below is a detail from a manuscript purporting to show a parliament of Edward I, with Alexander III of Scotland and Llywelyn of Wales, who is shown wearing a coronet and seated beneath the arms of England and not Gwynedd. Far from being a contemporary portrayal of a 13th-century event, it is a piece of nationalistic propaganda that appeared in Sir Thomas Wriothesley's *Garter Book* of around 1524.

ILLUSTRATION BELOW John Pinkerton, *Iconographia Scotica*, 1797.



accuracy of portrayal, a kind of standardisation audit for the College of Arms that was founded in 1484. A book entitled *Heraldic Visitations of Wales and Part of the Marches* was published in 1846 and its author Lewys Dwnn reproduces an extravagantly ornate illustration of what is described as the 'Arms of Wales', which is shown opposite on page 153. It is asserted that the coronet surmounting the design may have been that of Llywelyn from amongst the war booty seized by Edward I.

The illustrated analyses on this and the previous page show fairly conclusively that what was thought to be Llywelyn's coronet is a later piece of regalia, dating from when the English monarch's eldest son was invested with the title of Prince of Wales from the early 1300s onwards. A far more likely candidate for a piece of Gwynedd's regalia is the 'circlet', shown here in the detail of the seal from the 1340s. This could well be the object referred to as the bandlet, or '*garlonde*', tied around the head of the Welsh prince in the palace at Aberffraw, Anglesey.

Edward I's son Alphonso was following his father's instructions to adorn the shrine of Edward the Confessor (c.1004-1066) at the abbey of Westminster, an offering of thanksgiving for his victories in Wales. Edward I was named after this monarch, who was particularly venerated by the Plantagenets. Such an act does not appear to have been of any great benefit to the king, nor his son and heir apparent Alphonso, who died aged ten in August of 1284. Prince Alphonso was entombed in the Confessor's Chapel in Westminster Abbey, although his heart was buried at London's Blackfriars Priory, where Edward held parliaments and meetings of the Privy Council. Edward's sons John and Henry had died in 1271 and 1274, aged five and seven respectively.

Another son, later to become King Edward II (1284-1327), had been born at Caernarfon a few months before Alphonso's death, and this Edward was eventually to be invested with the title 'Prince of Wales'.



Although the story does not actually appear before the 16th-century, it is said that Edward I promised the Welsh he would provide them with a prince born in Wales who spoke no English. The Plantagenet kings spoke Anglo-Norman French, rather than the common language of those they ruled in England, and this dialect also differed from the French spoken in Paris, for example. That French remained the *de rigueur* language of the upper, and even aspiring middle classes of England until recent times is a cultural throwback to this era. If one wanted to get on in Plantagenet England one spoke the language of the king's court, plus that of the all-powerful church, Latin. Even today some people still consider it quite posh to be able to speak French, this being a linguistic inheritance from that time following the Norman Conquest.

Alphonso's parents, Edward and Queen Eleanor of Castile missed their son's funeral in London as they were away in North Wales at the time. In the summer of 1284, Edward was celebrating his victory over the Welsh, with Gwynedd being the centre of his activities. Firstly, he held a fair at Snowdon, although there is some uncertainty as to precisely where this took place. In Edward's time, 'Snaudune' (Snowhill) could have referred to that general location in Gwynedd, just as today we refer to Snowdonia. The *Chronicle of the Princes* simply says that the king held his fair at 'Moel-yr-Wyddfa'. The Welsh name for Snowdon itself is Yr Wyddfa, and it is said by some to mean the tumulus, the tomb of a 'giant' named Rhita (or Rhudda, Rhica, etc.) Gawr, who was slain by King Arthur. Given the abundance of Arthurian associations in Snowdon's immediate area – as explored in chapter three – Edward would have found this an appealing place in the landscape for a celebratory fair.

As to the precise location of the fair, opinions vary slightly, a journal article from 1860 (*Archaeologia Cambrensis*, volume VI) placing it at Llanllyfni in the Nantlle Valley, where Llywelyn had one of his manors, while William Catherall's *History of North Wales* (volume II 1828) refers to 'Bala Deulyn' in Nantlle. The antiquary Thomas Pennant in his book, *The Journey to Snowdon* of 1781, endorses this as the location. Among the records of Edward's expenses at this time are the costs of transporting the king's tents and pavilions from Chester to 'Baladeulyn', where the court stayed from the 10th of June to the 3rd of July 1284. The Worcester annalist (*Annales de Wigornia*) happens to mention a floor collapsing as guests were dancing, and these annals also record a celebratory feast at Caernarfon. This fair may have been a fairly modest affair, but what followed showed King Edward indulging his passion for what 13th-century nobles thought was thoroughly Arthurian in character.

The second victory celebration was at Nefyn on the Llyn Peninsula in Gwynedd, as illustrated opposite on page 156. Edward held a triumphal festival, including what was termed a 'Round Table'. This was to be a truly spectacular experience for the many English and foreign nobles who were invited to attend. State records in the form of what are known as the *Welsh Rolls*, dated 18th October 1284, give some indication of the scale of the Nefyn event from the catering arrangements alone. Edward is recorded as ordering money be given to the Sheriff of Caernarfon, Richard de Pulesdon, to purchase large quantities of wheat and for the construction of baking ovens at Nefyn, all intended to satisfy the appetites of the many guests. Edward was clearly in a buoyant mood, since his *Accounts of Alms* for 1284-5 in the National Archives record him giving forty-five shillings to the friars of Chester to celebrate nine days of masses for his soldiers, while he 'would go to the tournament at Nefyn'. A welcome break from hostilities for his majesty perhaps, although his troops may have been more appreciative of a celebratory feast in the soldiers' mess rather than a mass or two.

A medieval chronicle from Chester (*Annales Cestrienses*) gives the barest details, from which we learn that Edward watched jousting and the like between two aristocratic teams: 'King Edward caused a tournament to be held at Nevin [*sic.*] in Wales, where the earl of Lincoln, Henry de Lacy, was the leader on one side, and Richard de Burgh, earl of Ulster, on the other'.<sup>12</sup> The *Waverley Annals* adds that the event was announced by the 'Snowdon Herald', proclaiming that the tournament was 'as a sign of triumph against the wantonness of Wales'. The herald's title was not, in fact, anything to do with the Gwynedd mountain, but is actually derived from 'Snowdown', an old name associated with Stirling Castle in Scotland.<sup>13</sup> The heraldic title of 'Snawdoun Herald' remains in Scotland to this day. The tournament team-leader, Henry de Lacy was



a great friend of Edward, who rewarded him with extensive territories in Wales after the war, including the lordship of Denbigh in 1284. The township was walled and a new castle was installed along with an imported English population, the king's now standard approach to colonisation in Gwynedd and elsewhere.

Not everyone was in party mood for the Nefyn event, not least Archbishop Peckham. This prelate knew that several of the nobles and others who were attending had 'taken the cross', indicating their intention to go on crusade to the Holy Land. Peckham's archived papers show the archbishop writing to the Bishop of Bangor, instructing him to warn such participants that if they engaged in the more violent aspects of the Nefyn Round Table they would face excommunication. More drastic still was the threat that, if after three warnings they persisted in jousts, they may be denied ecclesiastical burial should they have a fatal accident in the tournament. Peckham did not seek to discourage those who had not taken the cross, probably for fear of irritating his king any further than was necessary. After all, these knights were needed for fighting the Saracens rather than each other, and Peckham was simply carrying out the prevailing edicts of his boss in Rome.

It is quite likely that the king took Arthur's 'crown' from the Welsh treasures with him, so as to

ILLUSTRATION Strutt's Regal and Ecclesiastical Antiquities, 1842.



The seal of Henry de Lacy (above) captures the spirit of the event, which took place in fields (right) at Nefyn that still record the 13th-century tournament:  
*Cae Iorwerth* –  
 Edward's Fields  
*Cae Ymryson* –  
 Field of the Contest



## The Nefyn Tournament and Round Table



*Coetan Arthur and Nant Gwrtheyrn are illustrated on the next page – 157.*







**Coeten Arthur** (left) is one of many megalithic monuments in North Wales, several of which have place-names associated with King Arthur and other characters from folk-memory, and also the romantic literature of the Middle Ages. Seen from a particular angle, the ridge along the capstone seems to mirror the contours of the distant mountains. **Nant Gwrtheyrn** (above) was the final stronghold of Vortigern, whose alleged tomb was uncovered there in the 17th-century.

complement this stage-managed victory celebration, but why did he hold this great event at the small, seemingly inconsequential coastal settlement of Nefyn? Little is known about the place at the time, although it must have been of some consequence, since ‘Y borth Nefyn’ (the port of Nefyn) gets a passing mention in the *History of Gruffydd ap Cynan* from the previous century. To discover why Edward chose it we need to bear in mind this king’s all-consuming passion for the world of Arthurian stories. When the 12th-century churchman and writer Gerald of Wales was journeying through the land, he and his companion arrived at Nefyn in April 1188, and it was here that Gerald says he found the works of Merlin Silvester. They were probably in the library of the old priory of the Celtic Church, where he is likely to have stayed. As Gerald says himself in his *Journey Through Wales*, dated to 1191, he had been searching for this text for a long time. The old Welsh literature tells us that this 6th-century Merlin – known in Wales as Myrddin Wyllt – was responsible for the death of his relatives, the grief of which sent him mad (Welsh *wyllt*), and he then gained the gift of prophecy. Geoffrey of Monmouth had produced his influential book, *Prophecies of Merlin*, at the beginning of the 1130s, spawning a genre that captivated writers and their chivalric readership throughout Europe in the Middle Ages.

While trying to justify his claim to overlordship of Scotland, Edward even drew on ‘evidence’ from Arthurian sources to support his ultimately flawed case, presented in 1301 to Pope Boniface VIII, who had

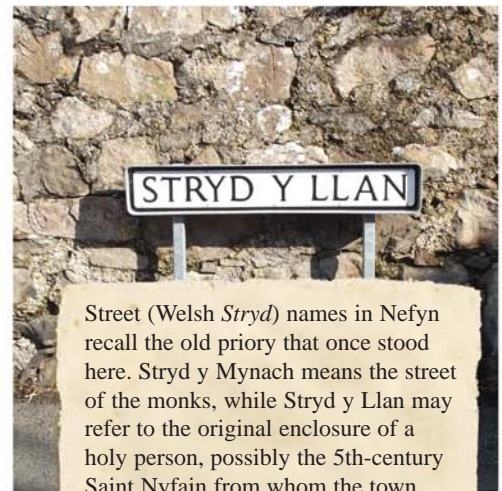


previously issued a papal bull supporting the kings of Scots' rights to be rulers of an independent Scotland, free of England's yoke. Edward wanted to be the king of Britain, just like Arthur, and while a papal blessing would have been supportive, the lack of one did not interfere with his ambitions. The contemporary chronicler, Peter Langtoft (died c.1305) from the Augustinian priory of Bridlington in Yorkshire, celebrated Edward's victory at Dunbar in Scotland in 1296 in verse. Langtoft wrote *'how often Merlin said the truth in his prophecies [...] with Scotland reunited to the regalities of which King Edward is proclaimed lord'*, and with a final flourish added that, *'Arthur never held the fiefs so fully'*. Langtoft lists these 'fiefdoms' as Wales, Ireland and, interestingly enough, Cornwall, illustrating how the West Country was perceived as having once had a degree of feudal independence from the English Crown. Edward I did not live long enough to see Scotland finally fall into his imperial clutches.

King Edward himself was incorporated into the Arthurian genre, when, in the late 13th/early 14th-century the Dutch chronicler, Lodewijk van Velthem weaved a fabulous tale around the invading Edward's battles with the Welsh. These exploits are described as taking place in the *'merciless forest'* which *'extends to the coast and is famous for its many marvels, which excited the keen interest of the invader'*.<sup>14</sup> In his more megalomaniac moments Edward probably identified rather too strongly with Arthur, and hence the choice of the remote Welsh fishing village of Nefyn for his Round Table-themed extravaganza. As shown on pages 156 and 157, the area around Nefyn is richly endowed with Arthurian associations that would have greatly appealed to this king, just as the legend-rich Snowdonia had done so for his earlier fair, the Worcester annalist saying it took place in *'Snoudonie'*, meaning the area rather than the mountain itself. The chronicler Matthew Paris delineates *'Snaudii'* as an irregular, roughly triangular area in his manuscript illustration of northern Britain.

All that remains in Nefyn today to recall to memory this medieval event are a handful of place-names, as mentioned in Charles Cliffe's tourists' guidebook of 1850: *'Edward, imitating Arthur, called the plain on which it was held the "round table". The site of the lists [tournament] can still be traced, and local names refer to the event. Thus there is "the Queen's court", or plain; Pen y Brenhin, the King's mound; and the "Parliament house".'* These identifications from the 19th-century are supplemented in Bond's guidebook to Nefyn published in 2008, where the author locates a group of fields still known locally as Cae Iorwerth, which means Edward's Field, and also Cae Ymryson meaning the Field of the Contest. Nefyn included what was probably one of the largest manors of Gwynedd's royal family, and RCAHMW records tell us that work was being undertaken on manorial buildings there in 1306-7, shortly before the death of Edward I. Along with the priory, the large manor would have accommodated the courtly contestants and many guests attending the king's PR event. As illustrated above, other place-names in Nefyn recall the once important ecclesiastical foundation, where Gerald appears to have searched the monks' library in 1188 and discovered Merlin's book.

Again relevant to the Arthurian theme, in the not too distant parish of Penllech there is an ancient chambered tomb, known in Welsh folk-memory as Coeten Arthur (Arthur's Quoit), pictured on page 157,



Street (Welsh *Stryd*) names in Nefyn recall the old priory that once stood here. *Stryd y Mynach* means the street of the monks, while *Stryd y Llan* may refer to the original enclosure of a holy person, possibly the 5th-century Saint Nyfain from whom the town may have derived its name. Below is the bay where the ships anchored that carried the tournament's participants.





although this megalithic structure evidently pre-dates the 6th-century hero of the Britons. This would not, of course, have been known in the Middle Ages, and there are several such structures known by this name on the Llyn Peninsula: Rhoslan near Criccieth, Cefn Amlwch at Fachwen near Clynnog, as well as the ancient and impressive site of Lligwy in Anglesey. The antiquaries of the 17th and 18th centuries mistakenly thought these stone structures were druids' altars. To the east of Nefyn lies the village of Llithfaen and the nearby Nant Gwrtheyrn, which translates as Vortigern's Stream or Valley. It will be recalled from chapter four of this book that he was the hapless king of the Britons from the Arthurian era, said to have unwittingly contributed to the eventual Saxon domination of Britain, despite Arthur's best military efforts.

In his *Topographical Dictionary of Wales* from 1833, Samuel Lewis repeats the story about the discovery of Vortigern's grave in this parish: '*Tradition still points out a small verdant mound as the site of this residence [Vortigern's]; and near it is a tumulus, now covered with turf, called Bedd Gwrtheyrn, or "Vortigern's grave," in which, on being opened some years since, was found a stone coffin containing the bones of a tall man, supposed to have been the remains of that unfortunate king*'. Probably originating from the 9th-century, the Welsh literary treasure, the *Stanzas of the Graves* names the resting places of various prominent figures, and Vortigern is said to be buried in a location called '*Ystfacheu*' or '*Ystyacheu*', a place-name that still remains unidentified.

The genealogical record inscribed on the Pillar of Eliseg, in the vale of Llangollen in North Wales, describes Vortigern – the Briton Gwrtheyrn – as having been married to Seira, the daughter of Magnus Maximus and his partner Elen Luyddog. Seira's bloodline led to the royal family of Powys, whose ruler, Cyngen ap Cadell, was responsible for erecting the pillar in the middle of the 9th-century, providing an almost permanent record of the dynasty. Once much taller, it was thrown down by soldiers during the English Civil War, and today we see only part of this monument, which once had a cross on the top. It was this that contributed the name Valle Crucis to the nearby Cistercian abbey, called Llanegwest in Yorke's *Royal Tribes of Wales* (1799) and elsewhere. The abbey itself was founded in 1201 on the site of an old wooden church, and nearby stand the ruins of castle Dinas Bran, once a stronghold of the ancient Welsh kingdom of Powys.

Certain modern writers have claimed that Edward's victory tournament was held at Nevern in Pembrokeshire, rather than the similarly-named Nefyn in Gwynedd. This is quite simply wrong. After years of searching through all the extant records of Edward's reign, the 19th-century historian Henry Gough assembled a pretty thorough and detailed itinerary of the king's whereabouts, and it was published in two volumes in 1900. This work shows that the king arrived at Caernarfon in April 1284, when he planned the Snowdon fair and Round Table event, and he attended the tournament a few miles down Gwynedd's coast at Nefyn at the end of July, spending some three days participating in the festivities. Edward remained in North Wales until November 1284, so whatever else this king's accomplishments may have been, the ability to be in two places at once was not one of them.

A few days after the Nefyn tournament ended on the 2nd of August, Edward made the short boat trip across to Bardsey Island, just off the coast of the Llyn Peninsula. His motive was to see for himself this famous and very ancient site of pilgrimage, and no doubt the prospect of visiting the place where Merlin (*Wyllt* – the mad) was buried excited the imagination of this king, the self-styled 'New Arthur'. In Edward's day there was still a thriving monastic community on the island (Latin *Insula Sanctorum* meaning either Island of Saints, or more simply Holy Island), where the remains of 20,000 saints were said to lie at the time. Not for ever it would seem. For some unknown reason they were dug up centuries later, and a visitor in the 1600s recorded the grim spectacle: '*There are still to be seen the ruins of an old church; three more they told us of. Near these ruins is an heap of dead men's skulls, and other bones of such votaries, as, for the sanctity of the place, had been buried there*'.<sup>15</sup> Edward may have sailed to Bardsey Island from the coastal site of Criccieth, the castle now being under an English garrison, since his itinerary records his stay there the day after visiting the sacred island, where he remained for three days. The king gave twenty-eight shillings to the Bardsey church before leaving the island, and he returned to Caernarfon ten days later.



Rae geririo gelin kythur. y gnelell'e  
 minch can minchur. Agvedygaurgarv achlur  
 Rae geririo gelin ddyad. yielase minchcanr

## Bard for Bardsey

And let that be a solitude, by passengers not trodden,

And around its walls the bosom of the bring sea;

The fair isle of Mary;

The holy isle of saints,

The type of renovation,

There to rest in happiness.

Christ the predicted Cross,

Will recognise me there

And guard me from the rage of hell,

A place of exiled beings; –

The Creator who formed me, will give me room among

The community of the inhabitants of Enlli.

## Meilyr Brydydd ap Mabon

Meilyr Brydydd was the bard at the court of Gruffudd ap Cynan (c.1055-1137), the king of Gwynedd, and in this extract from one of his poems he declares his desire to be buried on Bardsey Island (Welsh *Ynys Enlli*).

TRANSLATION Thomas Stephens, *Literature of the Cymry*, 1849.

FACSIMILE SCRIPTS taken from the *Black Book of Carmarthen* reproduced in John Williams, *Essays*, 1858.

Serch tan.  
 kyuerbir  
 lly ypop h  
 Serch guac  
 loneid ax  
 mon ychyl

Olynn.  
 Serch kad  
 ied kinve  
 Taliessin.  
 mon-Serch  
 ied kinre

O  
 capan. du dy  
 iadu aetys  
 n yscollhew y  
 guae. ny baut a  
 neare.

capan. du dy  
 iadu aetys  
 n yscollhew y  
 guae. ny baut a  
 neare.



Like any modern tourist Edward would have wanted to visit the various sites associated with his hero Arthur and the then much celebrated Merlin. There is a poem attributed to Myrddin Wyllt in the *Black Book of Carmarthen*, a collection of Welsh poetry dated from the 9th to the 12th-century. Merlin's poem is entitled *Yr Afallennau*, which translates as 'The Apple Trees', and it finds the mournful Merlin prophesying the outcome of the battles of his fellow countrymen while talking to the tree. He hid in the apple tree after the Battle of Arfderydd in 573, when he was unwittingly responsible for the death of his relatives. The battle's location was in Celydon, generally identified as Caledonia – today's Scotland. It appears that the apple trees were given to Merlin by the son of Ceidiaw, Gwenddolau, who is listed in the *Welsh Triads* (number 29) as leading one of the three faithful war-bands of Britain.

In a poem dating from around 1460, Hywel ap Dafydd declares Bardsey to be the most blessed island, and he describes how the staffs of pilgrims would, like the miraculous staff of Moses, 'grow up as stately trees [...] their blossoms to unfold'. It would seem from all this mingling of folk-memory that Bardsey is a veritable cauldron of magical associations, of blossoming staffs and their apple-tree inspiration – the Biblical Tree of Knowledge and its forbidden fruit. The Welsh word for a grove of apple trees is afallwyn (apple – *afal* plus grove – *llwyn*), a word that could so easily have become corrupted to Avalon, via Latin and then English. Given the Welsh word-link for apples and the Ynys Afallach of the Arthurian folk-memory, when combined with the modern research telling us the Bardsey monks cultivated a unique type of apple on the island, we have some compelling, albeit cryptic connections.

When Geoffrey of Monmouth produced his *Life of Merlin* (Latin *Vita Merlini*) around 1150, we are first introduced to the 'island of apples' (Latin *insula pomorum*) 'which men call The Fortunate Isle'. Geoffrey goes on to explain that nine sisters dwell there, skilled in the art of healing, and it is to here that the wounded King Arthur is brought after the Battle of Camlan. A chronicler who flourished in the early 1300s, John of Glastonbury also refers to the Isle of Apples and he declares it to be the New Jerusalem. He adds that it is a holy burial place, where salvation is promised to all those buried there. Bardsey is, of course, famed for its holy burials, so again a connection is made to this location in the ancient kingdom of Gwynedd – the 'White Land' of Arthurian legends? John of Glastonbury specifically states that it is located in North Wales. Similarly, the various medieval Romances of the Holy Grail say that Joseph of Arimathea and his party first landed in Britain at North Wales, which is certainly a long way from Glastonbury. Could Bardsey have been the location of the legendary Isle of Avalon, or is it all just a convergence of coincidences?

Our pilgrimage has led us through some intriguing byways, but it is now time to return to the path leading to the *Welsh Cross*, which along with Gwynedd's other royal treasures was now in the hands of King Edward. We may ask the question: how did these Welsh items reach the king as war booty? Some chroniclers and later historians suggest that the *Welsh Cross* was on the body of Llywelyn, when it was stripped by his killer. This is quite erroneous since there is no mention of the *Welsh Cross* being found on Llywelyn in a letter <sup>16</sup> written immediately after the prince's death. Dated 17th December 1282, it was from Archbishop Peckham to the king and refers to items found on the corpse, including a 'treasonable letter' and 'Llywelyn's privy seal'. We can be confident that had a large portion of the True Cross been on the body it would certainly have attracted the attention of an archbishop reporting to his king. Around the same time Peckham also wrote to the Bishop of Bath and Wells, mentioning what was found on Llywelyn's corpse, and again there is no mention of a treasured cross.

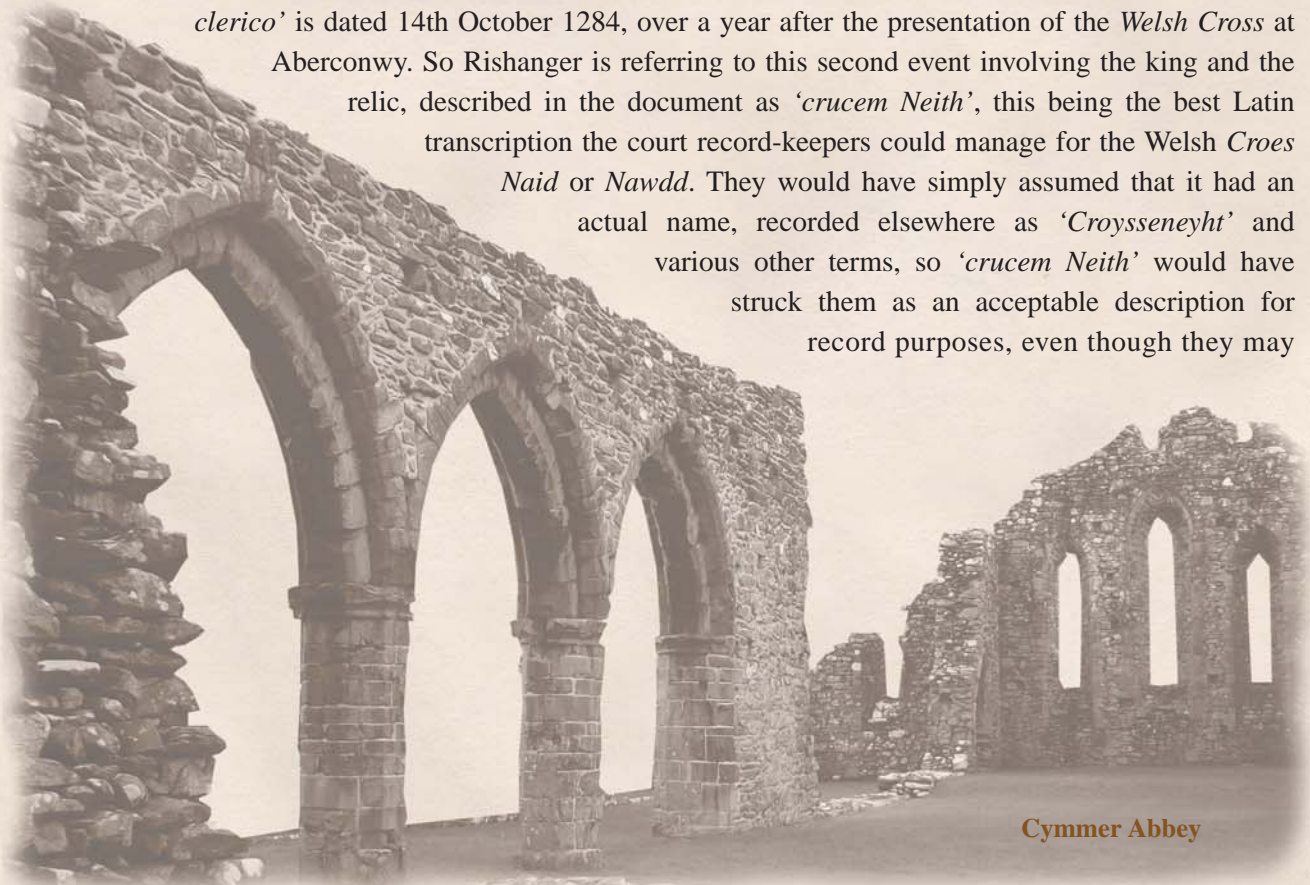
Several modern writers claim that the *Welsh Cross* and other treasures were lodged for safekeeping with the Cistercian monks of Cymmer Abbey, near Dolgellau, immediately prior to Llywelyn heading south on his last military campaign in 1282. There do not appear to be any contemporary records to support this assertion, which is probably a much repeated embellishment from some 19th-century writer. On examining the records of Edward's itinerary <sup>17</sup> in Wales, we learn that during a two-week stay in Dolwyddelan Castle in May 1283, the king made a day trip to Cymmer Abbey on the twentieth of that month, although his reasons for doing so are not recorded.



What we do know, from a document signed by Edward at Rhuddlan Castle on 25th June 1283 (*Welsh Rolls*), are the names of ten individuals responsible for delivering the relic, ‘by Welshmen called *Croysseneyht*’, to the notorious Reginald de Grey, who in turn presented it to Edward at Aberconwy. In appreciation of this the king granted these Welshmen and their heirs certain privileges, including exemption from military service. Documents relating to this event survive in the National Archives, recording that the *Welsh Cross* relic had been handed down through the royal dynasty of Gwynedd ‘*from time immemorial*’. The use of this particular phrase makes it abundantly clear that the relic’s origin was beyond the recall of memory, so we can now discount the possibility that it was acquired during crusades a mere forty years earlier, when Llywelyn ap Gruffydd embarked for the Holy Land in 1240. This means that the *Welsh Cross* must have been in Gwynedd for a very long time indeed for no one to be able to come up with a provenance to include in the official records of the early 1280s. The object is simply recorded as the ‘*Croysseneyht*’ (i.e. Croes Naid) without reference to either the Cornish Saint Neot, or the town of Neath in South Wales, these spurious imaginings being the product of monkish chroniclers and later historians.

An individual whose name was not included in the list of the ten other people involved in the presentation is Huw ap Ithel, who is thought to have been secretary to Dafydd ap Gruffydd. According to the contemporary chronicler and English monk, William Rishanger, it was Huw who presented the *Welsh Cross* (‘*Crucis Gneyt*’) to King Edward, receiving in return an education at Oxford, with a weekly allowance of twelve pence from the appreciative monarch. From interpreting these two seemingly conflicting accounts of events, it appears that the Gwynedd treasures were acquired firstly by the Justiciar of Chester from the ten named Welshmen, and then Edward arrived at Aberconwy where the relic was formally handed over ‘*to him by the hands of Reginald de Grey*’, as the state records describe the occasion. What then is Rishanger’s account referring to? Obviously, it would not need ten individuals to hand over Gwynedd’s royal treasures, and given the number involved it is likely that these Welshmen were participants in some formal surrender ceremony involving Chester’s justiciar in the summer of 1283.

The document granting what was essentially a king’s scholarship to ‘*Hugoni ab Ythel clerico*’ is dated 14th October 1284, over a year after the presentation of the *Welsh Cross* at Aberconwy. So Rishanger is referring to this second event involving the king and the relic, described in the document as ‘*crucem Neith*’, this being the best Latin transcription the court record-keepers could manage for the *Welsh Croes Naid* or *Nawdd*. They would have simply assumed that it had an actual name, recorded elsewhere as ‘*Croysseneyht*’ and various other terms, so ‘*crucem Neith*’ would have struck them as an acceptable description for record purposes, even though they may



Cymmer Abbey



have had no idea what it actually meant in Welsh. We can see in this word approximation of *'Neith'* in a Latin context how easily it would have been to lead later writers to assume it had some connection with a town in South Wales – it quite certainly did not.

Its initial acquisition took place in the summer of 1283 and Edward's victory celebrations occurred the following summer of 1284. So Rishanger's account of Huw ap Ithel presenting the *Welsh Cross* to the king is most likely to be reflecting a second ceremony, this time at Edward's Round Table spectacle at Nefyn, the culmination of his triumphal activities in Gwynedd. The *Welsh Cross* would certainly have provided a most prestigious show-piece at the Gwynedd tournament in July 1284. The event was, of course, designed to elevate the victor and diminish the vanquished.

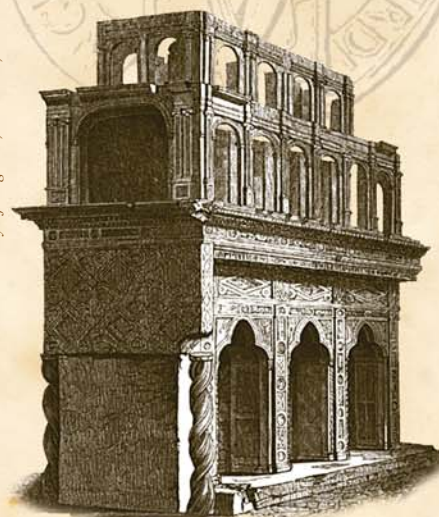
Edward's approach to demonstrating his military success in Wales even extended to his dinner guests, who dined off silver plates made from Gwynedd's royal treasure. In the regnal year 1283-4, the goldsmith William de Farndon had been given £57 worth of this silver for the purpose. And just to add insult to injury, the king's *Jewel Roll* for 1284 records that the seal matrices of the late rulers of Gwynedd were melted down and made into a chalice that was given to Vale Royal Abbey in Cheshire. As previously mentioned, this abbey was Edward's personal project and the charter of foundation was granted in 1270, before the then Prince Edward embarked for the Holy Land. The abbey's records provide an intriguing piece of information regarding Edward's exploits as a participant in the Ninth Crusade (1271-72), and it tells us something about his character: *'He came to the place where was kept the wood of the cross on which the Saviour of the world was hung; and he violently carried off with great joy a beautiful piece of it, which he brought back with him to England with much rejoicing'*. The abbey record's use of the phrase *'violently carried off'* makes it clear that Edward acquired the relic through his sword, rather than by payment or negotiation, but where exactly he got the object is not recorded. Following his father's death Edward was crowned in 1274 and he subsequently gave this True Cross relic to the abbey, in whose records it is described as *'this most precious jewel'*. The same source says that he also conferred on the abbey *'relics of the saints canonically approved'*, in addition to *'hallowed vessels [the chalice?]' and whole-silk vestments and precious books'*.<sup>18</sup>

Although Welsh rebellion continued to break out, particularly in the south, Edward now regarded Wales as conquered, having annexed the various ancient kingdoms into what is described to this day as a 'Principality'. Keen to reassure his English subjects of his great victory, Edward mounted a charm offensive in London, another PR spectacular featuring the *Welsh Cross* being staged to the apparent delight of the capital's citizens. One medieval chronicler described the highly dramatic pageant in the following manner: *'On the thirtieth of April [1285], after the subjugation of Wales, king Edward, coming to Westminster, preceded by the Archbishop of Canterbury and his suffragan bishops, all in their state vestments, and attended by a large company of nobles and members of religious bodies, and a great troop of the people of the country, conveyed a considerable portion of the cross of the Lord, adorned with gold and silver, and precious stones, which he had brought with him from Wales,*

### EDWARD THE CONFESSOR



When the half-Norman king of the English, Edward the Confessor died in 1066, Duke William of Normandy seized the opportunity to grab the throne, defeating Harold at Hastings. The event is illustrated in the famous Bayeux Tapestry, where the image above of Edward's funeral appears. He was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey in the tomb pictured below, and it became a prominent site of pilgrimage and devotion, particularly for the Plantagenet kings like Edward I, who installed the *Welsh Cross* on the tomb.



ILLUSTRATIONS The Pictorial History of England, volume I, 1846.

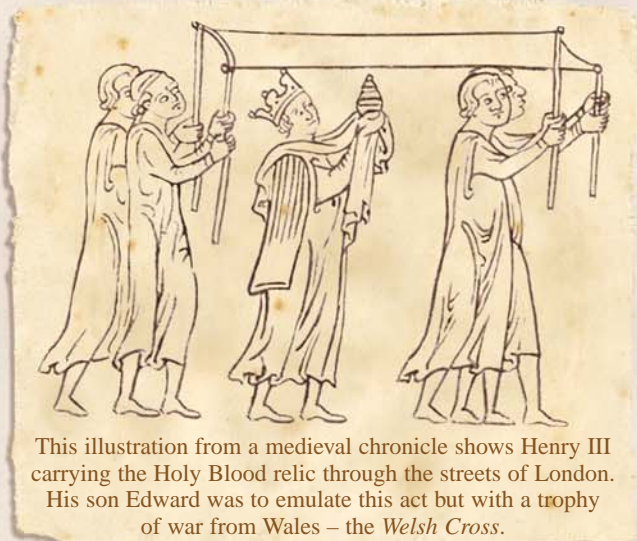


to Westminster, with a solemn procession, and rejoicings, and music'.<sup>19</sup> The use of the phrase 'considerable portion' by this chronicler echoes the previously-quoted descriptions of the *Welsh Cross* as being large, but again no dimensions are given in this account.

According to the chronicle (*Historia Anglicana*) of Bartholomew Cotton, who was a monk at Norwich, Edward and the others undertook the journey on foot from the Tower of London, with Archbishop Peckham carrying the *Welsh Cross* at the head of the procession. No doubt, Llywelyn would have been spinning in his grave at this point, since Peckham was behind the Welsh prince's excommunication; the state of anathema in which he died. Like others this archbishop had struggled with the religious leaders of Wales, because of the independent spirit of the Celtic Church, the background to which is discussed earlier in this book. Referring to an entry in the chronicle (*Annales Cestrienses*) from Chester's Abbey of Saint Werburg, we read how Peckham journeyed from England in 1284 'for the purpose of reforming the church of Wales, which was in a tottering condition'. Peckham had even beseeched Edward to permit Welsh clerics to leave for France after the hostilities ended, although one cannot help but wonder if his agenda was to supplant them with a more compliant clergy, English and of his own choosing. Spiritual colonisation was never far behind the conquering nobility and the influx of migrants from over the border.

Following Llywelyn's death Archbishop Peckham did, however, endeavour to protect certain Welsh monks from the potential wrath of the king, knowing that those who had taken the body to Cwm Hir Abbey could be vulnerable. Peckham wrote to Edward in the hope of forestalling reprisals against the clergy for their actions on that and other occasions, and his letter, dated 17th December 1282, provides an insight into the mood at the time: 'Know, then, Sire, that Dame Maude Longespeye [granddaughter of Llywelyn the Great] besought us by letters that we would absolve Llywelyn, so that he might be buried in consecrated ground; and we replied we would do nothing unless it could be proved that he showed signs of true repentance before death; and Edmund de Mortimer told me that he had heard from his vassals who were at the point of death that he (Llywelyn) had asked for the priest before his death [...] On this account, know then that the day he was wounded, a white monk [Cistercian from Cwm Hir Abbey] chanted him a mass, and Sir Roger de Mortimer took his vestments'. Peckham's letter continues: 'We beseech you take pity on the priests and suffer not that they be slain, nor that any bodily harm befall them'.<sup>20</sup> In spite of his state of excommunication, Llywelyn appears to have been buried in the consecrated site of Cwm Hir Abbey, so short of digging him up there was little Edward could do about it. And in any event, the king was in a victorious mood and happy just to see the back of that Welsh ruler, whose head was now perched on the Tower of London for all to see.

Edward I's grand procession in London with the *Welsh Cross* echoed one undertaken by his father, Henry III, as described in John Dart's 1723 history of Westminster Abbey. This historian is referring to 'another relick repositied at this shrine, viz. the blood (as they say) that issued from our Saviour's side on the Cross', and Dart continues his description: 'This was sent from the Holy Land to king Henry III by one of the Knights Hospitallers, with letters testimonials from the patriarch of Jerusalem and the masters of the Knights Templars and Hospitallers, and presented by this king to St. Edward on the day of his translation, anno 1247. Upon which solemn occasion the king sent orders to all the clergy in and about the city of London, that they should assemble together at the cathedral church of St. Paul, being arrayed in their surpluses and copes, with their clerks bearing crosses, and waxtapers lighted, whither the king himself likewise came; and taking the vessel of crystal in which this holy treasure was contained, he carried it in a dish elevated above his





forehead, being poorly habited, viz. barefoot, in a cope, without a hood, and so proceeded, without resting, to the church of Westminster, continually holding up the vessel, and keeping his eyes fixed on it'.

In October 1248 Pope Innocent IV approved indulgences of forty days to those who had brought the blood relic from Jerusalem. King Henry had previously received relics from the Knights Hospitalers, adding to his growing collection. In 1235 he had been offered oddities such as a portion of Jerusalem's Golden Gate, a piece of the Holy Sepulchre and, incredibly enough, a fragment of the Burning Bush in which Moses encountered his deity on Mount Horeb. Reliquaries containing what is claimed to be Christ's blood are still to be found in ecclesiastical foundations in Germany and France, although those in England, which included one at Hailes Abbey in Gloucestershire, did not survive the Reformation, which saw these things as 'popish folly' and they were destroyed. Some relics were, however, smuggled out of England before their seizure by the Crown, the Catholic Order of the Jesuits being particularly adept in this practice.

Wales had now been subsumed into the English Empire which, with an ironic twist of historic nomenclature became known as the *British* Empire, the Welsh being amongst the few surviving Britons of the island of Britannia, along with the Cornish, Cumbrians and whatever may have been left of the Strathclyde Britons. In the 20th-century a celebration of this imperial dominion-building over the centuries was organised in England's capital city. With the rather grand title, *Festival of Empire Imperial Exhibition and Pageant of London*, it took place in 1911 at the Crystal Palace, which was originally built to house London's Great Exhibition of 1851. Like its Victorian predecessor, this 20th-century festival was intended to showcase the arts, sciences and manufacturing achievements of Britain, and it also included extensive exhibits from countries within the empire.

The pageant itself was a theatrical experience, with evening and afternoon performances, each depicting the history of Britain in eight chronological settings, number seven in the programme being devoted to the activities and events characterising the reign of Edward I. It included a re-enactment of the procession that took place in 1285, with actors and actresses portraying the king's progress through the streets of London with the *Welsh Cross*, all accompanied by a fifty-piece orchestra and a huge choir. The pageant's illustrated programme describes this particular spectacle as '*Edward I and Dreams of Unity*'. For the Welsh who

experienced the original event in the Middle Ages it was more of a nightmare than a dream – and for 'unity' read 'conquest'. Looking at the page reproduced on the left, it appears that the programme's illustrator was poorly briefed. As we have read in Cotton's contemporary chronicle, Peckham carried the *Welsh Cross* at the head of the procession, accompanied by the great and the good of King Edward's court and church. The illustration resembles more the procession of Henry III with his blood relic, rather than his son's progress in London with the *Welsh Cross*.

Returning to the 13th-century spectacle, Edward I and his entourage went to Westminster Abbey and the tomb of his namesake, Edward the Confessor, with prayers and music befitting the solemnity of the occasion. It was at the Confessor's shrine that King Edward placed the *Welsh Cross*, along with other items during the service. According to the London chronicle (*Annales Londonienses*), a second, similar ceremony took place in the capital involving a procession to Saint Helen's Priory in Bishopsgate, probably on the 3rd May 1285 because this was the feast day of the 'Invention of the Holy Cross'. Edward would have regarded this as auspicious, given the focus was on the relic of the True Cross. Once more we encounter Helen of The Cross,



PART I SCENE VII. EDWARD I AND DREAMS OF UNITY. (A.D. 1285) TRANSLATION OF A FRAGMENT OF THE HOLY CROSS.



and in the annals of this priory we find the legend about Constantine's mother and London's early fortifications: 'It was fortified by the most pious Empress Helena, the most holy discoverer of the cross [...] she builded the walls about the cities of London and Colchester'. Again we find Helen engaged in building activities, and the annals go on to state that, 'the original church of St. Helen in London was dedicated to the Empress Helena, and is said to have been erected to her memory by her son Constantine'. The nuns of this priory were of the Benedictine Order and the 'foundation of the priory was probably about the year 1212, in the latter part of the reign of King John'.<sup>21</sup>

Again the recurring issue of the spelling of the name associated with this priory illustrates how the saintly conflation problem could so easily manifest itself over the centuries. This 16th-century drawing of the neighbourhood has a caption marked as 'S.Elen'. Also Henry Machyn's diary for 1550 refers to 'the parish of Saynt Ellen in Bishopsgate'.

Although the *Welsh Cross* is said to have been placed on the altar at Saint Helen's Priory, how long it may have remained there is not known, and in all probability it was returned to Westminster Abbey for veneration and security. In the crypt of the chapter house of the abbey there is what is known as the Pyx Chamber, an area walled off some time in the 12th-century and used in the 13th-century for storing valuables.

In Edward I's day this was a secure vault for depositing treasure, including the *Welsh Cross*, but how secure was put to the test in April 1303 when a robbery took place. Initially, the abbot and monks were blamed, causing one monkish chronicler in the *Flores Historiarum* to express outrage in his writings, mounting a wordy defence on behalf of the abbey's monks: 'So when the imprisonment of ten monks, for a matter concerning the treasury of the king of England [Edward I], is heard of, a wicked idea of suspicion at once enters men's minds [...] therefore it is necessary to set forth the circumstances connected with their imprisonment'. The chronicler continues in this defensive vein and in the account (published 1915) of the robbery by the historian T. F. Tout, he argues that this defence 'was certainly written by a Westminster monk, and, perhaps [...] by Robert of Reading [...] one of the forty-nine monks indicted and sent to the Tower on a charge of complicity in it'. Naturally outraged by the burglary, Edward I's lengthy investigations saw to it that the abbot and the forty-eight monks 'were soon joined by thirty-two other persons. This time the king's net had spread rather too widely, and the indiscriminate arrest of guilty and innocent excited some measure of sympathy, even for the guilty. The majority of the clerical prisoners were released on bail, but some half-dozen laymen and ten monks were still kept in custody'.<sup>22</sup>

The likely master-mind behind the robbery was a rather unlucky merchant by the name of Richard Pudlicote. He was unlucky on two counts: firstly, by being apprehended for robbing the king, and secondly for the circumstances that preceded the audacious burglary. His merchant activities had led him to Flanders to do some business, but he, along with other English merchants was seized by the Flemish authorities as surety for the considerable debts accrued by King Edward himself, during recent military operations in the Low Countries. On the 10th April 1303 the king's deteriorating relationship with the Count of Flanders led to Edward ordering his subjects and merchants to leave Flanders, and also that Flemish merchants should be expelled from England. The king's alliance with the Flemings against the French had collapsed. It seems that Pudlicote managed to escape from custody and he fled back to England, leaving behind his impounded merchandise. Embittered and now impoverished by his experience abroad, he obviously considered Edward's treasure as fair game, and with his accomplices he set about the daring raid at Westminster Abbey. Pudlicote claimed in his confession that he had spent several months, night after night making an opening in the masonry





of a wall of the abbey's chapter house. Such an activity could hardly have gone unnoticed, so it was obviously an 'inside job'.

The aftermath of the robbery shows this criminal enterprise to have been a reckless affair, with the loot turning up all over the place. A fisherman pulled in his nets on the River Thames and hauled up a royal silver goblet, while other items of the king's treasure were found under bushes near the abbey. Even the city's goldsmiths were handling stolen goods, including one William Torel who had previously been commissioned to undertake decorative work in the abbey itself. And it was not just the goldsmiths of London who were implicated in dealings with the king's stolen treasure, which was estimated to have a total value of £100,000. Edward's *Patent Rolls* for 26th October 1304 record how goldsmiths in Norfolk were offered some of the haul, a hundred florins 'from a stranger', and these goldsmiths compounded their complicity when they 'concealed him and secretly permitted him to escape so that he could not be arrested'.

Scandal seemed to follow scandal when a prostitute was found to have in her possession one of the king's valuable rings. On interrogation she explained that the sacrist – in charge of the abbey's sacred vessels and relics – had given it to her so that she would 'become his friend'. Adam de Warfield, the sacrist, was also found in possession of 'a silver gilt-edged flagon with fleur de lys'. Pudlicote's recorded confession describes both the loot itself and where he stashed it, including in the nearby cemetery: 'three pouches full of jewels and vessels, of which one was hanaps [ornate goblets] entire and in pieces. In another a great crucifix and jewels, a case of silver with gold spoons [...] rings, brooches, stones, crowns'<sup>23</sup> and so it goes on. The actual inventory drawn up by the Keeper of the King's Wardrobe, John de Drokensford, survives in the National Archives and was published in Hall's *Antiquities and Curiosities of the Exchequer* (1891). The inventory, dated the 20th of June 1303, lists the treasure and there appears in it 'a gold ring that belonged to the sister of Llywelyn son of Griffin lately Prince of Wales, handed over to the Wardrobe' on the 6th of February 1290. The circumstances surrounding the ring's acquisition is not recorded here.

The king was in Scotland when news of the robbery finally reached him, and on the 6th of June 1303 he issued a writ at Linlithgow appointing officers to investigate the wicked crime against his majesty. Investigations and trials dragged on while Edward was still away fighting in Scotland, but eventually half a

dozen conspirators – all laymen – were hanged in March 1304. Pudlicote, in whose possession stolen treasure was actually found, desperately argued that as he had been a member of the clergy in his youth he should benefit from clerical privileges. It was not to be and he was also hanged in October 1305 after some two years in custody.

Ten monks remained in the Tower, as bemoaned in the *Flores Historiarum*, and it appears from a letter dated the 23rd of May 1275 that Edward had been less than impressed with Westminster's monks many years before the robbery. The king wrote to the abbot complaining about the 'dissolute conduct and extravagant habits of monks there',<sup>24</sup> the said habits being their life-styles rather than clerical garments. In the spring of 1305 Edward returned from Scotland and a victorious campaign, his triumphant mood appearing to sway his judgement of these Westminster clerics, whom Pudlicote had heroically declared in his confession to be innocent. The abbey's sacrist was obviously as guilty as sin. In the inventory that was compiled when most of the stolen treasure was recovered, there is mention of a 'great crucifix', also referred to in Pudlicote's highly descriptive confession.

## Richard Pudlicote



ILLUSTRATION Strutt's *Regal and Ecclesiastical Antiquities*, 1842.



Assistant Keeper at Britain's Public Record Office, Hubert Hall's *Antiquities and Curiosities of the Exchequer* suggests that the stolen 'great crucifix' was actually the *Welsh Cross*: 'Even the cross of Gneith (a relic which the king regarded with superstitious reverence, and which had a keeper assigned to it from the royal household) was not spared'. By this Hall means that the *Welsh Cross* had been among the stolen goods, and elsewhere he says that, 'amongst the relics proper may be noticed the cross of Gneith (St. Neot's) and the black rood of Scotland. It was kept in a separate case, which was broken open by the robbers of the treasury in 1303. Perhaps this was the great jewelled crucifix described by Pudlicote in his confession as being among the contents of the three great pouches buried by him near St. Margaret's Church'.<sup>25</sup>

The response to Hall's use of the word 'perhaps' has to be *definitely not*, because Edward would, as usual, have taken the *Welsh Cross* with him on campaign to Scotland, kept with the other accoutrements of his portable chapel. Edward's attachment to the *Welsh Cross* saw him travelling with it north of the border on numerous occasions, before and after the time of the robbery in 1303. Pudlicote's confession states that the burglary took place on the 24th of April, after the king's departure, and Edward's financial administration had already been temporarily relocated to York for the convenience of the campaign in Scotland. The conspirators obviously knew that there would be little activity in the crypt, where the state documents and treasure were stored, leaving the mice to play while the cat was away, as it were.

Since the king was in Scotland when news of the robbery reached him, the *Welsh Cross* could not have been in the vault at Westminster. The king made his usual oblations to the relic at Lenton in Nottingham on the 9th of April and again at Kingston upon Hull on the 19th of April, each being stops on his march north through England towards war in Scotland. In any event, both the abbey's treasures and those of the king comprised assorted crucifixes and crosses, including a splendid one that had once belonged to Saint Louis of France. It is the distinction between two words that clinches it: a crucifix has a carved figure of Jesus, whereas a cross does not. None of the references or records relating to the relic from Wales refer to it as a crucifix – it is simply *croes* or cross.

The case in which the *Welsh Cross* was kept in the crypt was broken open by the thieves, but its usual contents were miles away at the time. During the interrogations of individuals suspected of being implicated in the burglary, a William de Paleys was found to have been involved. He was the gate-keeper and the empty case in which the *Welsh Cross* was normally kept in the vault was found under his bed. This case would probably have been the item mentioned in the records for Edward's regnal year 1286-7. The king spent £140 on gold to make a case, or reliquary, for the *Welsh Cross*, so even empty this item would have been extremely valuable. That amount of gold would also have made it quite heavy, so for the king's portable chapel in which the *Welsh Cross* was kept while he was on campaign, something lighter in weight for its storage would have been necessary. And hence the empty case at the time of the burglary. The inventory from 1307, listing the objects in the king's portable chapel describes the relic's travelling case: 'In a coffer [chest] signed above with the sign of the cross. Namely the crux Neygh [another scribal attempt at *Naid* or *Nawdd*] adorned with gold and precious stones, along with the foot of the same cross of gold and gemstones in a certain leather covering fitted to the said foot, outside the coffer'. Records from the regnal year 1293-4 show that the king had spent £104 on gold and jewels to adorn the base of the *Welsh Cross*, so Edward's religious luggage was still substantial, especially with all those other relics that accompanied him on his travels.

Before we leave the records of the king's Wardrobe and Exchequer, which was the financial hub of the monarch's dealings with his realm and beyond, it is worth examining an intriguing aspect of the record-keeping process itself. The various chests, boxes and other means of storing important documents were each labelled to identify their contents. A simple system of symbols was often used on the labels and these corresponded to those marked in the margins of summary documents used by officials of the king's senior administrators on a day-to-day basis. These officials would, of course, have been literate so words would have sufficed perfectly well for them, so why would illustrative symbols have been introduced for administrative purposes? The answer lies in the fact that the minions (often called 'door-keepers'), who fetched and carried



the many books and documents from where they were stored to where they were needed, would like most of the population at the time be unable to read or write. So a simple pictogram system was devised, these symbols or signs being referred to in the Latin records as '*sub tali signo*'. It just made filing simpler.

Many of these symbols are reproduced in Hubert Hall's book on the workings of the king's exchequer and treasury, as well as in similar studies like Sir Francis Palgrave's collected works. Some are simply of an heraldic nature, or decorative monograms, while others like that relating to oaths of fealty depict a hand above the Bible which would be easily understood. Similarly, one indicating Westminster Abbey documents would have a pictogram drawing of the building. When it comes to the documents concerning individuals, flattery does not seem to be uppermost in the creative process. An example of this levity appears in the documents concerning Robert de Sutton, the Abbot of Peterborough from 1262 to 1273. This cleric made the mistake of siding with the barons against Henry III, and after Simon de Montfort was defeated at Evesham Abbot Robert and his abbey were heavily fined by the king. The cartoon-like '*signum*' of the abbot used on documents concerning his debt payments clearly present him as strikingly ugly, something of an 'in joke' in the exchequer and one that would have amused the king. This is but one example of where a humourous touch is evident, causing the writer Edward Edwards to observe that the designs were '*often grotesque but always very plain-speaking*' in his book, *Synoptical Tables of the Records of the Realm* (1865).

The '*signa*' that signify the king's records relating to Wales are especially interesting, comprising drawings of Welsh warriors brandishing weapons, as shown opposite on page 170. These appear in documents known as *Littere Wallie* and *Scripta Wallie*, preserved in *Liber A* in the National Archives, a book of the treasury of receipts used in the king's exchequer. It was compiled in the reign of Edward I, the last entry being dated 1292. These images were used to reference the exchequer chests in which original documents concerning debts of the Gwynedd rulers were stored, and the amounts owed to the English Crown were very considerable indeed. Peace came with a hefty price tag when Llywelyn ap Gruffydd was dealing with Edward's father Henry III. In 1257 Llywelyn offered the king £1,000 for a seven-year truce, upping it to three times that for something more permanent. By 1270 Llywelyn was in arrears on his payments, and a couple of years later he was in default on these growing debts, on which late-payment penalties were being imposed. Llywelyn recognised what a perilous position this posed for himself and Gwynedd, where he was taxing heavily in the hope of raising desperately needed funds.

While one can readily see why vaguely sarcastic sketches of Welsh warriors would be used to signify which documents were kept where, there is one striking feature in these illustrations: each is shown without a shoe on one of the feet. Why would attention be literally drawn to a naked foot? Just as the Abbot of Peterborough's graphic treatment was with contemptuous humour, so too was Llywelyn because of his involvement in the Barons' War, his alliance with Montfort and the provision of Welsh forces. The chronicler William Rishanger said of the battle at Evesham that the greatest loss was among the Welsh soldiers. As mentioned on page 132, after this battle Simon de Montfort's severed foot was sent to the Welsh ruler by the victorious King Henry. The *Chronicle of Melrose* notes how this macabre war souvenir was sent so that, '*the prince might perceive how much the English hated him for his connection with this Simon*'. It would seem that the 'graphic designers' of the exchequer were not going to forget it, and no doubt the clerks found it all rather amusing. The king could hardly have failed to recognise this feature and he would have appreciated its wry significance.

There can be little doubt that the arrival in Gwynedd of Simon de Montfort's foot would have had the desired shock impact on Llywelyn, who was – as far as the records can tell us – not personally present at Evesham. And nor are there any records of his actual reaction, or anything to indicate what he did with it. One of Simon's feet is known to have been kept as a holy relic at Alnwick Abbey in Northumberland. The local lord, John de Vesci was responsible for its preservation there, and he had fought alongside Simon at the battle in 1265, when he was wounded and captured by the king's victorious forces. Eventually released John went on to side with northern barons in another uprising in 1267, but he was later forgiven and even joined Prince



## Symbols of Debt and Defiance



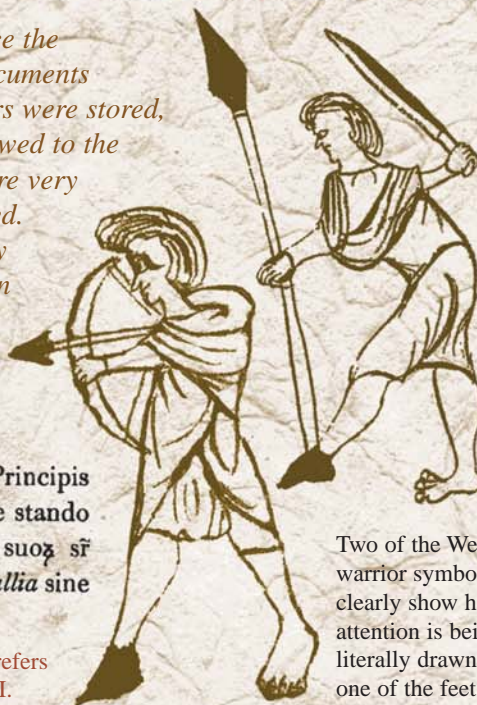
The Abbot of  
Peterborough.



The symbol for 'church reform' is very explicit.

*“ These images were used to reference the Exchequer chests in which original documents concerning debts of the Gwynedd rulers were stored, and the amounts owed to the English Crown were very considerable indeed.*

*Peace came with a hefty price tag when Llywelyn ap Gruffydd was dealing with Edward's father Henry III. ”*



Two of the Welsh warrior symbols clearly show how attention is being literally drawn to one of the feet.

In pixide ad  
tale signum.



38 ¶ Carta David filii Leulini q<sup>o</sup>ndam Principis Wallie facta Dño H. Regi Angl fil R Johis de stando juri in curia dñi Dñi H. Regis t heredum suor s<sup>r</sup> porcoe tre que fuit dñi Leulini p<sup>r</sup>is sui in Wallia sine data.

A transcription from Palgrave's study of Exchequer records refers to a charter between Dafydd ap Llywelyn and King Henry III.



The Pyx Chamber was the medieval vault beneath Westminster Abbey, with chests used for storing treasure and important documents. Each was labelled with a symbol.



The sign used for Exchequer records related to Westminster Abbey showed little interest in accurate portrayal of its actual architectural appearance.



Chests containing documents recording oaths of fealty bore a symbol of a hand above the Bible.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Other than the Welsh Warriors shown above, the various symbols depicted here are taken from: Hall's *The Antiquities and Curiosities of the Exchequer* (1891), and Palgrave's *The Ancient Calendars and Inventories of His Majesty's Exchequer* (1836), from which is also reproduced the picture of the medieval treasury chests. The image of the Pyx Chamber is from Scott's *Gleanings from Westminster Abbey* (1861).

LEFT The *Liber A* manuscript in the National Archives at Kew (reference E36/274).





Edward on crusade at the beginning of the 1270s. In 1277 and again in 1282 John was campaigning alongside King Edward against the Welsh, but when and how the baron acquired the relic of Simon's foot is currently unknown. Edward himself would have taken a very dim view of his deceased enemy's foot being treated as a holy relic, so its veneration at Alnwick would have been discreet if not secret.

The *Chronicle of Melrose* describes a miracle attributed to Simon's foot, saying how '*the merits of Simon were so effectual with God [...] great glory must exist in this foot of Simon*', adding '*that the power of healing shone forth even from the lifeless substance in which it was enshrouded – this shoe of silver; for the power of God thus invisibly issued forth from the foot, through the shoe, so as to make this sick man whole*'. The reference to the silver shoe indicates that it had been enclosed in an ornate reliquary, like that illustrated on page 132. As was customary in the various religious institutions of the Middle Ages, assorted relics like these were on display for personal worship by the clergy, pilgrims and other visitors, including royalty. This usually involved making a monetary offering, an oblation, a source of income for the abbeys and churches that could prove quite substantial, as the ecclesiastical and state records show. Glastonbury was raking in donations from its prodigious number of relics, including such Old Testament novelties as pieces of the altar of Moses and also his rod, plus some relics of the prophet Daniel, along with the other items from sundry New Testament people and places.

King Edward I regularly engaged in this form of devotional practice. In May of 1287, for example, the king was at Plympton Priory in Devon and he had obviously taken the *Welsh Cross* with him, the records of the King's Remembrancer (solicitor to the treasury) saying that he made oblations to the '*Crucem de Gneyth*' (the *Welsh Cross*) while in the chapel of the priory. Estates at Plympton belonged to the Earl of Hereford, who had married Edward's youngest daughter Elizabeth in 1302 at Westminster Abbey. She had been born at Rhuddlan Castle in 1281. Edward does not seem to have had any qualms about taking his pregnant wife into what was essentially a war zone in North Wales, and Queen Eleanor had also accompanied Edward on crusade to the Holy Land, where their daughter Joan had been born in April 1272.

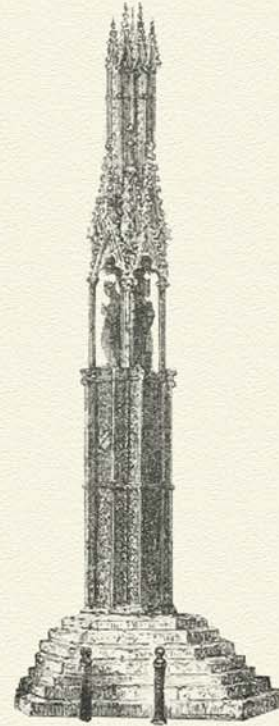
The records clearly show that Edward was especially attached to the *Welsh Cross*, and he obviously regarded it as more of a personal possession than just another royal trophy of war, to be deposited in some abbey on a pious whim. In 1786 London's Society of Antiquaries decided to transcribe and publish what are simply referred to as the *Wardrobe Accounts* for the 28th year (1299-1300) of Edward I's reign. They sought to make available to scholars '*the many curious and interesting facts relative to the customs and usages, and the state of this kingdom at that period of time*'.<sup>26</sup> These contemporary records show that the king had the *Welsh Cross* with him on a visit to Hyde Abbey, near Winchester, referred to in the documents as '*ecclesia Abbathie de Neumonster*', meaning Newminster Abbey (consecrated c.903) to distinguish it from the older Saxon building. It is said that Alfred the Great was re-interred in the new abbey, where Edward I made his oblation to the *Welsh Cross* with five shillings on the 6th of January 1300. Again, on the 2nd of February, the *Welsh Cross* was with the king at the chapel in Windsor Castle, where he '*made oblations at the altar of St. George's Chapel, and among those recorded is one of five shillings to the Cross of Gneyth, and on the same day the Queen made an offering to the same cross*'.<sup>27</sup>

This queen was his second wife Margaret, the daughter of King Philip III of France, and Edward had married her just months earlier. He was some forty years older than Margaret. Edward's Queen Eleanor had died in 1290 near Lincoln, and on the processional journey to London the twelve overnight stopping-places of the funeral cortege were designated for monumental stone crosses to be erected in public areas. These twelve cenotaphs, or 'empty tombs', became known as the Eleanor Crosses, and included the one that gave Charing Cross in London its name. It was destroyed by the Puritans in 1647. Edward's hope was that passers-by would say prayers for the soul of his late wife. By the 19th of May 1300 the king was in Wisbech, a town in Cambridgeshire, where on the Feast of the Ascension he made oblation to the *Welsh Cross* of another five shillings in the castle, repeating this in the same month at Spalding Priory in Lincolnshire, a county that was honoured with three of the Eleanor Crosses, four of which are pictured opposite on page 172.





CHARING



GEDDINGTON

Four  
of the  
**Eleanor  
Crosses**



NORTHAMPTON



WALTHAM



Before we continue to follow Edward and his oblationary activities with the *Welsh Cross*, there is recorded in the accounts of the executors of the late Queen Eleanor's Will a rather curious benefaction. It consisted of a payment of one hundred shillings to 'David of Aberconwy for making a vaulted chamber'<sup>28</sup> in the abbey, according to directions specified by the queen herself. As the monks moved out of the original abbey on the coast in the early 1280s and Eleanor died in 1290, the abbey in question must have been the new one at Maenan, which was often still referred to in contemporary documents as Aberconwy Abbey. What she had in mind for this chamber is presently unknown, and her own tomb is in Westminster Abbey, near that of her father-in-law Henry III. However, Eleanor's heart was entombed in Blackfriars Priory in London and her viscera in Lincoln Cathedral, a grisly distribution pattern that was not unusual at the time.

For the year 1297 there are four recorded oblations to the *Welsh Cross*, including on Christmas Day while Edward attended a service at the priory church in Ipswich, Suffolk, where the *Welsh Cross* was venerated on the high altar. An earlier occasion was in February of that year when King Edward and Queen Margaret spent a week at the famous Norfolk shrine of Walsingham, where a day was devoted to the adoration of the venue's patron, the Virgin Mary. After masses and several oblations being made to various images and relics, including 'Milk of the Blessed Virgin', these royal pilgrims rounded things off with the presence of the *Welsh Cross*, to which the usual oblation was made. The inventory compiled following Edward's death in 1307 includes this otherwise inexplicable 'milk' relic as being in a vial made of clear crystal, kept in an oblong wooden casket.

It was quite often the king's practice to make oblations to both the *Welsh* relic and also the 'Holy Thorn' (Latin *Spinam de corona Christi*), claimed to be from Christ's Crown of Thorns which the Romans in Jerusalem placed on his head before the crucifixion, mocking him as 'King of the Jews'. What is noteworthy about Edward's oblations to these relics is that, while the *Welsh Cross* attracted five shillings the thorn received an oblation of only three shillings. This remained the king's payment pattern for many years, and even his son and successor, the wayward Edward II issued an ordinance in 1323 requiring the same amounts should be paid to these two relics: 'the king should offer certainly at the cross upon the day of the great friday, five shillings' and again on Easter Day, while 'if our Lord's thorn be there, he should offer to the thorn three shillings.'<sup>29</sup>

One of the last recorded occasions when King Edward I made oblation to the *Welsh Cross* in England was during his stay at the manor of Lyndhurst in the New Forest, Hampshire. It was the 2nd of February 1306, the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin, when in addition to the *Welsh* relic and the thorn, Edward gave two shillings to the 'Cross of



Founded in 1134 by the Count of Louvain, the Church of Our Lady of the Chapel, Brussels, celebrated its anniversary with a publication in 1790, featuring treasured relics of The Passion, including a spine from the Crown of Thorns.



*Scotland* – presumably the Black Rood. It is evident from the sums of money allocated that the *Welsh Cross* attracted the highest amount, the implication being that Edward perceived this relic as having the greatest spiritual potency from among his extensive collection. It seems that his acquisitive piety had a clear hierarchy when measured in monetary terms.

In the *Almoners' Accounts* <sup>30</sup> of Edward's more public displays of piety, we find in his almsgiving and feeding of poor people some evidence of a surge in enthusiasm for the Feast of the Invention of the Holy Cross on the 3rd of May. The king had taken possession of the *Welsh Cross* in 1283, and the number of disadvantaged individuals who received his charity in 1283-4 totalled one hundred during that particular religious festival. In the following regnal year of 1284-5, beneficiaries of his largess on the same occasion had risen to five hundred people, that being significant as the period in which he celebrated his acquisition of the *Welsh Cross* in both Gwynedd and London. By the year 1288-9 the number had dwindled to a mere forty individuals receiving alms on Holy Cross Day. While Edward's almsgiving in honour of Helen and the finding of the True Cross may have fluctuated, his devotion to the *Welsh Cross* remained constant.

When Edward set out on his military campaigns against Scotland, the list of his devotional expenses shows him making regular oblations to the '*Crucem de Gneyth*', as the *Welsh Cross* is variously named in these texts. On examining these accounts in detail, we find that he made more offerings to the *Welsh Cross* than to any similar cross or other relic. Each dated entry shows the location and the amount of money the king donated to the cross. As a comparative indicator of what these amounts were worth at the time, a daily wage could be as little as two or three pennies (twelve to the shilling), so it was no mere loose change at the beginning of the 14th-century. Examples of these offerings – as recorded in the *Wardrobe Accounts* – to the *Welsh Cross* include five shillings made at Newminster, near Morpeth, Northumberland in 1300. In April of that year, the amount was another five shillings at Langthorne Abbey, Stratford, and by September he was making further oblations to the *Welsh Cross*, this time at Holmcultram Abbey in what is now Cumbria, while heading for the border with Scotland. It was at Holmcultram on the 7th October 1300, that Edward formerly released the Bishop of Glasgow, after he had sworn his allegiance on the *Welsh Cross*. Each of the several entries in the accounts follows his military march northwards.

Again reinforcing the point that the king invariably travelled with the *Welsh Cross*, we find in the records how on occasions when Edward was away he would send money for oblations to various shrines. For example, in November 1297 he was in Newcastle and he sent cash for offerings to be made at the shrine of Richard of Chichester, a former bishop who was canonised in 1262. On another occasion the king was so concerned about his sick falcon that he sent offerings to the shrine of Saint Thomas Cantilupe at Hereford Cathedral, imploring the saint's intervention, and he also included a wax image of the ailing bird. There are no records of his sending money for offerings to be distantly made to the *Welsh Cross*, demonstrating that he had it with him on his journeys to Scotland, as well as during his travels in England and also in Gascony, where in October 1286 Edward had made oblation to '*Sancte Crucis Gneyt*' as it is referred to in these records.

Having arrived in Scotland he made another two oblations to the *Welsh Cross*, one at Dumfries and another at Caerlaverock, both in November. The siege of Caerlaverock Castle found Edward in attendance in mid-July and late August 1300, and no doubt the king felt his oblation did the trick, since the garrison of sixty brave Scotsmen eventually surrendered, faced with an English army of eighty-seven barons and their many thousands of troops. At the time the English heralds among the army composed what is known as a *Roll of Arms*, verses graphically describing the heraldry displayed on banners and the like by the nobles. This medieval text shows that King Edward had personally adopted the title of Prince of Wales, before finally conferring the title on his son, sometime between September 1300 and March 1301: '*Edward Lord of Ireland, King of Scotland and England, Prince of Wales and Duke of Aquitaine [...] on his banner he bore in a red field three leopards passant, of fine gold; fierce, cruel, and untameable; thus placed to signify, that, like them, to his enemies the King is dreadful, fierce and haughty, and the effects of his resentment terrible*'. This same source provides an illustration of that Arthurian idealisation of Edward I and his time, referring to the Bishop



of Durham being unable to attend the siege in person: *'he nevertheless knowing the King's expedition, sent him one hundred and fifty of his men at arms, possessed of more accomplishments than Arthur received from Merlin'*.<sup>31</sup>

Earlier evidence of Edward I using the title Prince of Wales was following the death of his first wife, Eleanor of Castile. In describing her tomb in Westminster Abbey, a 17th-century historian mentions how there used to be *'a tablet of wood hanging on an iron chain near to her tomb'*. It bore a verse in English and Latin that included the line, *'Edward's wife, first of that name, and Prince of Wales by right'*.<sup>32</sup> His son Edward II is widely believed to have been the first Englishman to hold the title Prince of Wales, but it is clearly evident that the father was actually the first by applying it to himself, as a reflection of his conquest.

In July 1301 Edward was at Kelso Abbey, founded in the 12th-century by King David I of Scotland. As usual, Edward made his oblations in the abbey's chapel with the now standard amounts to the *Welsh Cross*, the holy thorn and the Black Rood. The abbey itself was busily being repaired by the monks after yet more war damage. On the 14th of September the king had reached Bothwell Castle, some ten miles south of Glasgow. After taking a hammering from the siege engines of Edward's army, it too was in need of repair. As the masons chipped away to make good the stonework, the king was in the castle chapel parting with his shillings towards the now familiar group of relics.

Now in his mid-sixties, Edward was back in England and staying at the royal manor of Burstwick in East Yorkshire, taking a much-needed break from hostilities in Scotland, and making oblations as usual. Curiously, this particular record from the 1st of November 1304 says that he gave seven shillings to the *Welsh Cross*, rather than the usual five. Perhaps he felt that an extra two shillings to that precious symbol of his victory over the Welsh might do the trick in his efforts to subdue Scotland. A couple of years later Edward was back there, hammering away at the Scots, who were maintaining their struggle to remain independent of the English Crown. The king sought to thwart these aspirations at the Priory of Lanercost in Cumbria, Scotland's 'steward' (*Seneschal d'Escoce*) James being finally brought to heel. In October 1306 James *'did fealty to the king for his lands in Scotland'* and swore his oath on the *Welsh Cross* (*'la Croiz Neytz'*) and *'la blackerode and other relics'*.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps Edward felt it was a heaven-sent result for an extra two shillings of oblation – another step towards dominion over Scotland and cheap at the price.

The king had already acquired the sacred relics of Wales and Scotland too had become productive territory for his acquisitive piety. His baggage train must have got heavier and heavier with all the loot. The *Wardrobe Accounts* tell us that the king gave the bailiff of Darlington, in north-east England, forty-five shillings to repair the bridge *'for the passage of the King's treasure and of diverse carriages'*. Edward's portable chapel itself comprised a large tent-like structure, in which were cushions, fabric hangings and assorted vestments for the services held within. Recorded expenses (21st August 1304) relating to the chapel include the *'wages of a groom watching the chapel in Scotland'*, his vigilance costing one and a half pennies each day. A further ten shillings was expended for *'a wagon and ten oxen and two grooms to carry the chapel from Dumfermline to St Andrews'*, although before it left Dumfermline two shillings had to be spent on *'mending a window and a candelabrum'*. A clerk by the name of Elie de Whetele was reimbursed for the purchase in Carlisle of silk curtains for the *Welsh Cross*, and there were *'four iron crooks [hooks] bought for the curtain for the Croysneythe'*. This illustration shows how curtains were used on reliquaries during the Middle Ages.



ILLUSTRATION Strutt's *Regal and Ecclesiastical Antiquities*, 1842.



Prince Edward was also with his father in Scotland, although his expenses were frequently of a more mundane nature, the settling of gambling debts and extravagant new clothes being featured in the exchequer records. He also had a portable chapel, but this twenty year-old's tastes and enthusiasms differed greatly from those of the king, leading one to speculate whether he took things seriously enough when, on the 20th November 1303, he paid ten pennies per day for ten days to Adam of Lichfield for transporting his pet lion in Scotland. Having previously lost other sons, Edward must have wondered whether his crown would sit well on the head of this young man, who seemed to show little aptitude for expanding the realm, or for even hanging on to it.

Now regarding himself as 'Lord Paramount' of Britain as a whole and also Ireland, Edward had acquired the famous Stone of Scone from Scotland in 1296, an object of great regal and religious significance to the Scots. Some say that the English king was given a substitute for the real thing. The monarchs of England have been subsequently crowned seated above it, and the object was only returned to Scotland in 1996. The original was believed to have arrived with the Scots during their migration from Ireland to Argyll ('Coast of the Gaels', i.e. the Irish/Scots) in the Dark Ages, and thereafter their kings were crowned while seated upon it. Edward installed it in Westminster Abbey, enclosed within a throne-like chair (illustrated here), and his *Wardrobe Accounts* for 1300 record the following: 'A payment to Walter the painter for a step to the foot of the new chair in which the stone of Scotland was placed near the altar, before the shrine of St. Edward, in Westminster Abbey; and to the carpenters and painters painting the said step; and for gold and colours to paint it with; and making a case to cover the said chair'. This typically theatrical enterprise cost Edward nearly twelve pounds.

In 1306 Edward I was pestering Pope Clement V for papal approval to move Scone Abbey itself, the king regarding its location as being in the midst of a 'perverse nation'. Fearing the worst, the pope wrote to the Archbishop of York on the 17th of June that year, ordering him to make enquiries about the abbey's fate and its many relics, and to report back on his findings. It appears that Edward was aiming to repeat his actions at Aberconwy Abbey, since Scone was to Scotland's royal families what the Welsh abbey had been to the nobility of Gwynedd. This English king understood the symbolism of conquest all too well. And also its practicalities, since the Abbot of Scone was in Edward's custody, heading for imprisonment at Mere Castle in Wiltshire – a sufficiently safe distance from Scotland.

With war raging between Scotland and England, Robert Wishart, the Bishop of Glasgow was one of the men at the centre of the struggle, but he had been captured at Irvine by the English in July 1297 and imprisoned. At Holmcultram in Cumbria on 16th October 1300 this brave-hearted bishop was declared released from the king's custody, having sworn an oath of fealty to Edward on both '*la Croys Neyt et la blake rode de Escoce*'. Wishart's tongue was obviously in his cheek when he swore fealty to Edward, because he returned to Scotland and the war against England. It appears that the bishop did not share the English king's devotion to these particular relics, the *Welsh Cross* and the Black Rood of Scotland. Over in Rome there had been considerable disquiet for some time about the treatment being meted out to Scotland's clergy, the suspicion being that Edward would supplant them with Englishmen to do his bidding. He got away with it in Wales to a large extent, and now Scotland was almost in the grip of his iron fist. Who could stand in his way this time? In April 1289 Pope Nicholas IV had declared an '*inhibition forbidding anyone not a native of Scotland to take the habit in any house of a religious order in that realm, or to hold any dignity of the same*'.<sup>34</sup> Edward was probably livid at this injunction, but the pope still held sufficient authority to restrain this king's more questionable ambitions.

### The Coronation Chair

Beneath the chair Edward I placed the Stone of Scone, said to have been brought from Ireland during the migration over into the Western Isles and mainland of Scotland. This created the kingdom of Dalriada around the Arthurian period of British history, the area roughly corresponding to Argyll.

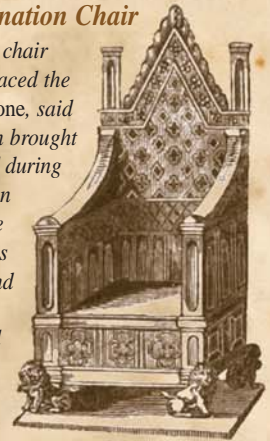
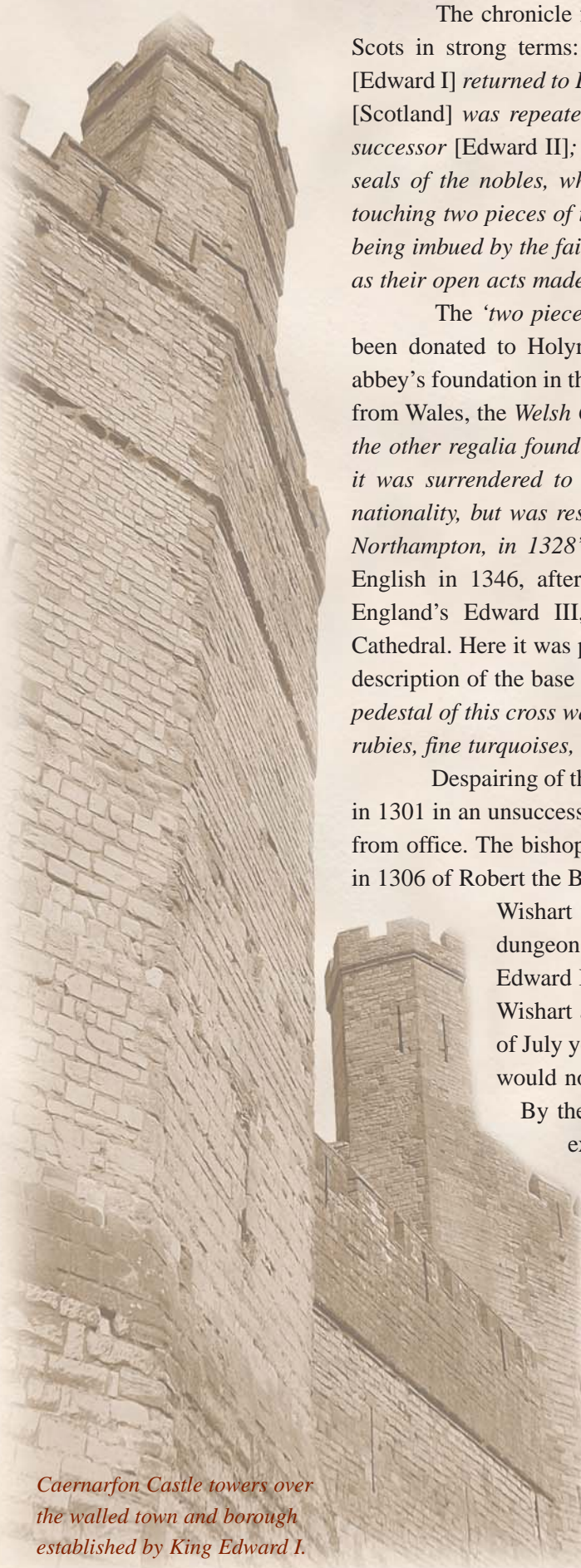


ILLUSTRATION from Thomas Allen's *History and Antiquities of London*, 1828.





The chronicle from Lanercost Priory denounced the oath-breaking Scots in strong terms: *'Having brought all that land into subjection he [Edward I] returned to Berwick [...] where the homage of the people of Alban [Scotland] was repeated to my lord the King of England and his son and successor [Edward II]; also it was renewed again by a charter with all the seals of the nobles, which remains confirmed by a solemn oath made in touching two pieces of the Lord's cross. But that ceremony of swearing, not being imbued by the faith of those who performed it, was worthless to them, as their open acts made manifest in the following year'*.<sup>35</sup>

The *'two pieces'* of the cross included the Black Rood, which had been donated to Holyrood Abbey in Edinburgh by King David I at the abbey's foundation in the 12th-century (probably 1128). Like its counterpart from Wales, the *Welsh Cross*, it became war booty when *'it appears among the other regalia found in the treasury of the castle in 1291, in which year it was surrendered to Edward I, with all the other emblems of Scottish nationality, but was restored, according to the stipulations of the treaty of Northampton, in 1328'*.<sup>36</sup> The Black Rood was seized once more by the English in 1346, after the defeat in battle of David II of Scotland by England's Edward III, and this crucifix was then lodged in Durham Cathedral. Here it was placed on a pillar near Saint Cuthbert's shrine, and a description of the base of this famous Scot's treasure survives: *'The foot or pedestal of this cross was garnished with rich and large diamonds, precious rubies, fine turquoises, and costly emeralds'*.<sup>37</sup>

Despairing of the situation with Wishart, Edward I wrote to the pope in 1301 in an unsuccessful attempt to have this bishop of Glasgow removed from office. The bishop's next defiant move was to conduct the coronation in 1306 of Robert the Bruce (1274-1329), King Robert I of Scotland. Sadly, Wishart was captured yet again and cast into an English dungeon. Pope Clement V had written to the newly-crowned Edward II on the 9th of April 1308, exhorting him to release Wishart and some other clerics held in custody. On the 23rd of July young Edward finally replied to the pope by saying he would not release the bishop until war with Scotland ended.

By then old and blind, Wishart was finally released in an exchange of prisoners in 1314, after Edward II had been heavily defeated by the Scots at the Battle of Bannockburn in that year. It was a complete rout of a much larger English army and the king eventually fled the field with his nobles.

Edward II is referred to as Edward of Caernarfon because he was born there on the 25th of April 1284. He was not, however, born in the castle, as many believe, because at that time it was barely begun, according to an expert on this particular piece of Edward I's handiwork: *'No part of the castle, as we see it today, was then in existence, but if the palace of the Welsh princes*

*Caernarfon Castle towers over the walled town and borough established by King Edward I.*



*stood on the same site, it would be natural that Edward and his queen should take up their quarters there and that their son should be born in the dwelling of the princes to whose title he was to succeed*'.<sup>38</sup>

This Edward had little more success than his father with Scotland's bishops swearing on the assorted relics in England's royal collection, notably the *Welsh Cross*. William de Lamberton, the Bishop of Saint Andrews from 1297 had sworn fealty to the new king in 1308 '*upon the Consecrated Body of our Lord [i.e. the bread of the Eucharist] and upon the Cross Gnayth*'<sup>39</sup> – the *Welsh Cross* in yet another of its scribal forms. Lamberton had written to Edward II in August of that year, confirming his oath and saying that he would remain in the English diocese of Durham, where the king had permitted him to stay. It appears from the *History of St. Andrews* (published in 1843) that Edward I did not have much luck either in his attempts to get this prelate to keep to his oath. Lamberton, when chancellor of Glasgow in 1296, had '*done fealty to Edward as his rightful king, upon the consecrated host, upon the Gospels, the Cross Neyth [another variation], and the black rood of Scotland; that, nevertheless, he had taken part with William Wallace, and, with his aid, got himself elected Bishop of St. Andrews, and used every effort to support him against England*'.<sup>40</sup>

Obviously, Lamberton was no more committed to his oath than Wishart had been, and he went on to play a key role in the fight for Scotland's freedom from English domination. As well as attending the coronation of Robert the Bruce, Lamberton played a pivotal part in the struggle that led to the *Declaration of Arbroath* in 1320, which declared Scotland's rights as an independent sovereign state. Edward II seemed thwarted at every turn, especially when he received a letter from the pope urging him to make peace with Scotland. Unlike his father, this Edward lacked the tyrannical streak that characterised so many of Longshanks' actions in expanding the dominions of the English Crown.

History tends to take a dim view of Edward II and not just because of his poor performance on the battlefield and in diplomacy generally. It was his extravagant and overt affection for the young knight Piers Gaveston that hit the medieval headlines. Walter of Guisborough's 14th-century chronicle recounts how when in 1306 Prince Edward sought his father's agreement to have Piers elevated to Count of Ponthieu, the king became enraged by his son's audacity. His majesty accused young Edward of seeking to give away titled lands when he, the prince, had never even won any. The chronicler says the king in his wrath grabbed his son's head and tore away his hair by handfulls. Another chronicler of the time, the Benedictine monk John of Trokelowe declared that Prince Edward had loved Piers '*immoderately*' from his earliest days at court.

It was all too much for his father Edward I, who determined to send his son's favourite into exile, just months before the old king died in 1307. As was customary in exile and banishment procedures, the individuals being banned from the kingdom were obliged to swear an oath that they would not return without the monarch's permission. Among other relics that Gaveston was obliged to swear his oath upon was the '*Croiz Neit*'.<sup>41</sup> This formal procedure was to take place at Easter 1307, as recorded in the *Close Rolls* (28th February, Lanercost Priory) of Edward I. The king's memorandum, dated the 26th of February, goes on to say that provision for expenses would be made to Gaveston while abroad, although the amount was extremely modest given what the extravagant young Piers was used to receiving from his princely friend, or by just helping himself. Gaveston finally left for Gascony in May, much to the dismay of Prince Edward, but to the delight of the barons and many church leaders.

The year 1307 was to see the end of Longshanks. While on his death-bed King Edward induced his son to swear under oath to continue the war with Scotland, eliciting a promise from the young Edward that he would carry his father's corpse before the English army as a talisman to favour victory. Clearly, the old king was now seeing himself as a potential relic. The king's second dying wish was that his heart should be sent to the Holy Land, along with the colossal sum of £32,000 to support the crusade. Finally, he insisted that Gaveston should never be recalled from exile, fearing that the young man from Gascony would have so detrimental an effect on his son's ability to rule the kingdom that this must be affirmed under oath, again taken on the *Welsh Cross*.

Following his father's death in July 1307, the new King Edward felt that Gaveston's oath no longer



applied, and nor did his own. Piers Gaveston was swiftly returned to England after a matter of weeks in exile, and he was showered with gifts within the realm. He was elevated to Earl of Cornwall by a charter dated at Dumfries on the 6th of August 1307, just weeks after the death of young Edward's father. Gaveston's pride was such that he even managed to elicit a royal decree from Edward, seeking to ensure that people did not address him by his first name, but rather by his new title. England's nobility were outraged and angered by Gaveston's return, as well as his influence and virtually exclusive access to the king making matters even worse.

The clergy were in a state of apoplexy about their relationship. Robert Winchelsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury who was exiled in 1306 by Edward I in a row over money, was also returned to England by Edward II, to whom Winchelsey 'and other great men' were obliged to swear fealty on '*la Croice Neite*', as recorded in what is generally referred to as the *Brut Chronicle* or the *Prose Brut*. By 1308 Edward II was probably convinced that Winchelsey was plotting against him, since this influential church leader and the Earl of Warwick had been vehemently opposed to Gaveston's return. The earl even pronounced Gaveston to be an enemy of the king's realm, and he was not alone in holding that view.

This tabloid story-line was reported in the *Chronicle of Lanercost*: 'the whole of England murmured against the king, and was indignant against the aforesaid Piers', adding that it was because of 'the improper familiarity which my lord Edward the younger entertained with him'. The chronicler goes on to reveal that



This detail from an engraving of a painting by Marcus Stone (1840-1921) depicts Edward II and Piers Gaveston, mocking the group behind them, a conspiratorial huddle dominated by the Earl of Lancaster, who rests menacingly on a large sword. Edward's Queen Isabella looks on and she was to prove to be the downfall of her husband. Engraving by J. Stephenson from *The Art Journal*, 1875.



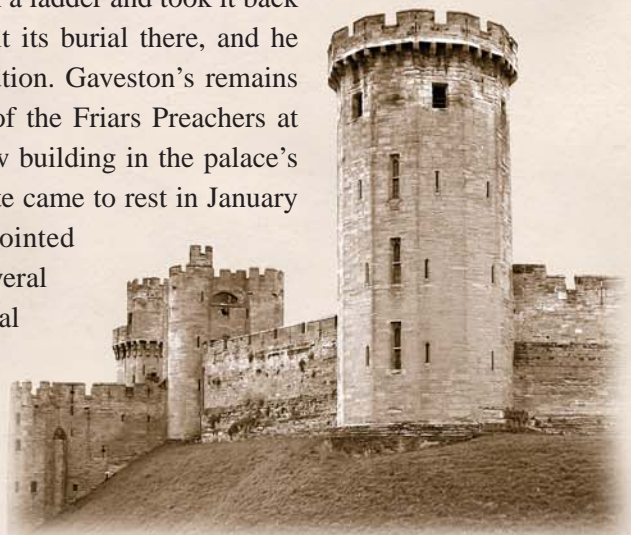
Edward also *'caused many other leading men, who had been with his father, to be dismissed from their offices'*. The new king had begun making powerful enemies even before his coronation. Given that his terminally-ill father had spent the whole winter of 1306-7 at Lanercost Priory, no doubt this particular chronicler had ample opportunity to gather first-hand information up to that point in time, shortly before Edward I died.

In a later chronicle, the work of Sir Richard Baker (c.1568-1645), the writer stresses how volatile the situation was becoming for Edward and Piers, as some nobles and clergy increased the volume of their murmurings: *'they came unto him [Edward II], signifying what a heinous transgression of his father's Will it was to call home Gaveston: and seeing the charge was no less given to them than to him, if he did not perform it they would; and therefore unless he would remove Gaveston from the Court and Kingdom, they would hinder his Coronation from proceeding'*.<sup>42</sup>

Edward was married in January 1308 at Boulogne to the French king's daughter Isabella, who was only twelve years old. They had been betrothed since 1303, when several European kings and queens had attended the engagement banquet, along with Edward's 'best man' Piers Gaveston. At the end of February they were crowned at Westminster Abbey. With bare-faced provocation towards the barons and the church, Edward appointed Gaveston to carry the crown of Edward the Confessor at the coronation ceremony. It was obviously the hottest ticket in town, and Baker's chronicle says that, *'there was so great a press of people that Sir John Blackwel was crowded to death'*. Edward and Isabella went on to have four children, their eldest son being another Edward, and he became the third Plantagenet of that name to inherit the throne of England, exhibiting the qualities of his grandfather to a remarkable extent.

Under growing pressure from barons and clergy, Edward II had been coerced into agreeing to exile the man he obviously loved, appointing him Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, where he might be perceived as being away from the court and out of the way of certain nobles, who clearly had little love for their king and even less for Gaveston. With papal support Edward was able to arrange Gaveston's return from exile, but this infuriated the barons beyond measure and they went on to a war footing. Gaveston was exiled yet again. Things continued to simmer before coming to the boil at the end of 1311, when Gaveston returned from Ireland and was met by his ever-forgiving king. In January 1312 Edward II issued an incendiary proclamation regarding his beloved Piers. It was all too much for the barons and Gaveston was captured by the nobles in June of that year and imprisoned in Warwick Castle (pictured below), where he was tried and condemned. King Edward was in York at the time. Piers was then taken onto the road to Kenilworth and at a place called Blacklow Hill he was murdered on the spot.

The chronicles say that the Earl of Lancaster gave the order to two Welshmen, who stabbed Gaveston several times and then cut off his head. A contemporary source, the *Annales Londonienses* adds that some shoe-makers from Warwick placed the body and head on a ladder and took it back to the town, but the Earl of Warwick would not permit its burial there, and he ordered that they should return it to the place of execution. Gaveston's remains were then taken to Oxford and finally to the convent of the Friars Preachers at Kings Langley, where Edward had commissioned a new building in the palace's park. It was in the friars' church that this king's favourite came to rest in January 1315 in a ceremony conducted by the newly-appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, Walter Reynolds, with several other clerics being present. Anticipating a substantial attendance, King Edward had arranged for pavilions to be transported from London to Langley, but England's nobility failed to turn up in numbers, as reported in the chronicle of John of Trokelowe. The magnates of the realm had clearly expressed their feelings.





A 15th-century song (Trinity College MS) rejoiced at the death of Gaveston, the composer of the lyric alluding to the pilfering of the young Edward's treasure as *'the fraud upon the treasury'*, adding that Gaveston was *'clothed in the extreme of pride.'*<sup>43</sup> The *Annales Londonienses* commented that Edward II had actually placed the royal treasure under the control of Gaveston, including *'jewels and precious stones'*, while the chronicle from London's Saint Paul's Cathedral, the *Annales Paulini*, records that Gaveston had even induced Edward to give him the wedding gifts from the king's new royal father-in-law, Philip the Fair of France.

When Piers Gaveston and his entourage had been seized near Warwick, a large quantity of precious items were found on them. A lengthy list of this treasure survives in the form of a receipt issued at Windsor by Edward II on February 27th 1313.<sup>44</sup> Among the assorted items were two gold crosses, decorated with various jewels, and also an enamelled gold dragon; a connection with Wales, perhaps? A more explicit connection is mentioned in the list when recording rubies, sapphires, garnets and crystal, formerly belonging to *'Leulyn Prince Gales'* – Llywelyn Prince of Wales. These precious stones were from the Welsh treasure that was kept in either the vault or adorning the Confessor's shrine at Westminster. This official receipt clearly illustrates Gaveston's acquisition of royal property, either as gifts from the king he so easily manipulated, or by simply helping himself.

Edward took as his new favourite Gaveston's brother-in-law, the young Hugh Despenser. Both would need more than a piece of the True Cross to provide them with a refuge from the woes that were about to befall these two men.

A tragic destiny continued to unfold its miserable course when Queen Isabella returned from abroad and by force of arms captured her fleeing husband and the Despensers. The young Hugh was savagely treated, as the French chronicler, Jean Froissart (c.1337-c.1405) described: *'And so he was then judged by plain sentence, first to be drawn on a hurdle with trumps and trumpets through all the city of Hereford, and after to be brought into the market-place, whereas all the people were assembled, and there to be tied on high upon a ladder that every man might see him; and in the same place there to be made a great fire, and there his privy members cut from him, because they reputed him as an heretic and so deemed, and so to be burnt in the fire before his face.'*<sup>45</sup> Still alive, his bowels followed in like manner and he was slowly butchered during this public spectacle. It is said that Queen Isabella and her staunchest ally and lover, Roger Mortimer (1287-1330) watched the cruel proceedings along with Hereford's townsfolk.

The now imprisoned King Edward II was eventually forced to abdicate in January 1327 and 'died in custody', several chroniclers saying that he was tortured to death with a fire iron through his anus. It was a wicked deed that some of his contemporaries obviously thought appropriate, given the widespread rumours

## Gloucester Cathedral



Edward II was entombed in Gloucester Cathedral, where a beautifully carved effigy was placed above his sarcophagus. Edward chose the burial place in his Will, far distant from Westminster Abbey and his royal ancestors' graves.





and accusations of sodomy. The genital mutilation at the young Hugh Despenser's execution also seems to betoken a vicious homophobic response. Another French chronicler, Jean Le Bel (c.1290-1370) asserts that Hugh was emasculated because '*he was a sodomite*'. Unloved by his queen, his nobles and his subjects, Edward had lost the few people he loved because he loved them. He was forced to pass on the Plantagenet crown to his teenage son, who was crowned as Edward III in February 1327, with the ambitious Mortimer then acting as regent in close company with Queen Isabella.

As a postscript to this chapter on the historic destiny of the royal treasures of Gwynedd, there is some small comfort to be had for Wales from knowing that Edward I did not seize it all during his conquest. Treasure that had lain buried for centuries eventually surfaced in north-east Wales in the early 1800s, as described by the Welsh historian, Angharad Llwyd in her study published in 1833: '*The remaining part [of the treasure] was accidentally found by some men, who were cutting a road in the park, behind the Palace of Maesmynan, near Caerwys [Flintshire], the usual residence of Prince Llywelyn in times of peace. The workmen discovered a casket, made of brass, and curiously wrought, which crumbled into dust, when exposed to the air; it was buried three feet under ground, and near a large stone. It contained seven armlets of twisted, or wreathed gold, fastened by hooks, in the manner of torques; a large piece of solid gold, heart shaped, with a ring adhering to the broadest end of it; four torques, one of these being much heavier than the others; a large chain, composed of beads, about the size of pigeons' eggs, having a ring between each to connect it together [...] a brooch, consisting of a large discoloured pearl, surmounted by small precious stones in the centre*'.<sup>46</sup>

It all amounted in weight to some twelve pounds of gold, a useful contribution to Longshanks' war-chest had he but known it was there. Nevertheless, Edward I had obtained that which was of inestimable value to him personally – the *Welsh Cross*. The medieval annals from the priory of Dunstable in Bedfordshire described it as capable of many miracles, a claim that was to resonate with the English monarchs for many generations to come.

It never returned to Wales.







Saint George's Chapel  
Windsor Castle





hen Edward III (1312-1377) acceded to the often precarious throne in February 1327, the reign began when we next encounter the *Welsh Cross* in its voyage through English history; it had left Welsh history some forty years earlier. Its first appearance is contained in an indenture, dated the 31st of January 1327, concerning the newly appointed king's treasurer, Adam Bishop of Hereford, to whom the keys to the treasury in the Tower of London were being transferred. This document records that the *Welsh Cross* was kept there in a coffer, while its base was kept in a separate one in the Tower's treasury. If nothing else, this information would suggest that when combined the whole artefact was of considerable size as it needed separate storage. The coffers themselves were simply large chests under lock and key, rather than the ornate and valuable container mentioned at the time of the burglary at Westminster in 1303. The two parts of the *Welsh Cross* would be removed from these storage chests, assembled and placed on the altar in the king's chapel at the Tower, or elsewhere as required for devotional purposes.

This treasure from Wales had previously adorned the shrine of Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey, an institution much favoured by the Plantagenet kings and famous for its many relics. The details of indulgences on offer for those venerating the relics include: *'To the Cross of our Lord the same as to the reliques, with remission of a seventh part of sins'*. The 18th-century historian John Dart also tells us that amongst other items said to be connected with Jesus, the abbey's founder also gave a *'part of His Cross'*. Under the terms of the Will of Henry VII, who died in 1509, another *'pece of the Holie Crosse'* was bequeathed to the abbey, specified to be displayed on an altar to be erected within the railed-enclosure of his tomb. The king's Will adds that it came from the Greek island of Chios and the relic was encased in gold and garnished with pearls and precious stones.

The abbey's collection also included – rather improbably – *'the rust of our Saviour's Knife'*. There was also a nail from the crucifixion that had been in Edward I's possession and was in his portable chapel at the time of his death in 1307. The abbey also held relics of Saint Helen, *'at whose altar was Mass said, and indulgence for two years and thirty days to those who heard it'*.<sup>1</sup> And as if a bit of 1st-century rust was not bizarre enough, Westminster Abbey also owned *'the belt of the Blessed Virgin wrought by her own hands [...] and one of the six jars in which at Cana the water was made wine'*.<sup>2</sup> Credulity is stretched to breaking point by these inventories of income-generating objects, to which the faithful said their prayers and made offerings in the hope of a better afterlife.

This abbey's treasures were sometimes viewed as a cash-machine by the kings themselves, as Dart's history of Westminster Abbey explains, when referring to Henry III's need to fund his expensive war efforts: *'His value for this saint [Edward the Confessor] was so great, that he always swore by him, and gave his name to his son Edward I. Yet I find in the year 1243, being straightened by some exigencies, that he was forced to make free with the jewels and treasure that had been offered to his shrine, and pawn them to carry on his expedition. However, he obligated himself, by writing, to see them safely restored to the convent. These heaps of wealth daily increased, for the preserving which, one of the senior monks was made keeper of the feretry [shrine] of St. Edward'*.

Edward II's *Wardrobe Accounts* from the early 1320s show that the *'Cruce Gneith'* (the *Welsh Cross* again) was kept in the King's Chapel in the Tower of London, and in the year of his deposition (1327) it was still there, noted as being among the items in the custody of the treasurer and chamberlains of the exchequer. This location obviously offered greater security than the vault beneath the abbey, scene of the burglary and the acquisitive activities of Piers Gaveston. There is also a brief reference in Edward III's *Patent Rolls*, dated the 16th of September 1329, where we find his father's chaplain handing over several religious objects from *'the late king's chapel'*, including *'a precious gold cross, in which was placed part of the precious wood'*. It is by no means certain that this entry refers to the *Welsh Cross*, which is invariably named in such records, but the likelihood is that it was this particular treasure. Edward III continued to keep it in the same chapel, as recorded in 1330 when an *Inventory of Crown Jewels*<sup>3</sup> was drawn up, recording the *'Cruce Gneyth'* as being in the King's Chapel at the Tower of London.



This inventory from 1330 says that the keys to access the *Welsh Cross* were in a purse, or pouch, which shows that the object continued to be kept in coffers for security. There it would have remained, emerging occasionally in the Tower's chapel for veneration, or travelling elsewhere as required by the king. A similar list was drawn up in Edward III's regnal year 1344-45, when the king's treasures held in the Tower of London were being transferred into the custody of the newly appointed treasurer, William de Edyngton. Item 24 in the inventory refers to transferring the key to access '*de cruce Gneyth*' in its storage chest.

Documentary sources show that Edward III made oblations to the '*crosneyt*' in his second regnal year (1328-29) at Windsor, where this act of piety was shared with his queen, Philippa of Hainault, whom he formally married at York Minister in January 1328, having been married by proxy the previous year. The *Welsh Cross* also put in appearances at York in the regnal year 1334-35, and again at Clipstone in Nottinghamshire that year, recorded as '*crucem de Gneyth*' in the *Wardrobe Accounts* published in 1787. The king's father, Edward II had visited Clipstone in 1316 and gifted property to the friary, the Royal Confirmation Charter (1319) stating that he was especially fond of the prior and brethren of this institution. Clipstone was the site of a royal palace of the Plantagenets since at least the time of King John. The following regnal year (1335-36) the *Welsh Cross* was again with Edward III at Eltham Palace near Greenwich, when it was also recorded as the '*crucem de Gneythe*',<sup>4</sup> this particular palace having been a gift to Edward's father from the Bishop of Durham. Again in 1337 his majesty was making more oblations to the treasured relic, amounting to the usual five shillings: '*In offerings made by the king at the cross "Gneyth" in his Chapel within the Palace of Westminster, on the feast of the Invention of the Holy Cross*'.<sup>5</sup> This palace chapel is likely to have been the one built by Henry III in the 1240s and known as the Chamber of the Holy Cross. It is noteworthy that the sum of five shillings remained the oblation amount in this reign. In the following year of 1338 the records show Edward making offerings to the '*cross called Gneyth*'<sup>6</sup> in the chapel of his manor at Havering in Essex.

This selection from the records clearly shows that this royal treasure continued to be a uniquely esteemed and well travelled artefact in the reign of Edward III. The *Welsh Cross* was also usually removed from storage in the Tower for Easter celebrations, but did this king take it on campaign with him abroad, just as his grandfather had when he travelled to Gascony? No records have surfaced thus far to confirm that he did so, but since this king also had a portable chapel it is, perhaps, probable that it travelled with him to France. Dated the 7th of March 1347, Edward's *Close Rolls* reveal that the king had ordered '*Robert de Mildenhale, keeper of the king's jewels and other things in the Tower of London*' to have delivered for transportation to Calais '*two coffers with ornaments therein for the king's [portable] chapel [...] for the present Easter*'. Although the precise contents of these strongboxes are currently unknown, it is certainly possible that the *Welsh Cross* was included, given that it invariably featured in the celebration of Easter. The siege of Calais had begun in September 1346 and lasted until the town finally surrendered after a year of resistance, and Edward returned to England in October 1347.

During the regnal year 1338-39 a new appointment was made in the king's treasury and Robert de Wodehouse took up the role as treasurer. As was custom and practice, an inventory was drawn up as part of the transfer of responsibility. Item 207 in the list reads '*Un Sapphire de la croice Gneyth*'<sup>7</sup> valued at forty shillings. It is not known whether this was a gemstone that had come off the *Welsh Cross* at some point and was pending refitting, or whether it had been purchased and was going to be installed in the cross or its base. An inventory from 1300 of Edward I's treasure (*Wardrobe Accounts* – '*Jocalia*') makes no reference to the cross as containing sapphires, only '*rubies, emeralds and pearls*', as well as '*a great part of the cross of Christ*'. This sapphire may have been intended as an oblation to the '*croice Gneyth*', when placed on an altar during the veneration procedure. A similar activity occurred involving Edward III's great-grandfather, Henry III, who was visited by the titular king of Jerusalem, John of Brienne in 1223. The young Henry gave John four large sapphires, which the French-born nobleman then placed on the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury. John's valuable oblation probably sought Saint Thomas' blessing on the then current recruitment drive for crusaders to embark for the Holy Land.

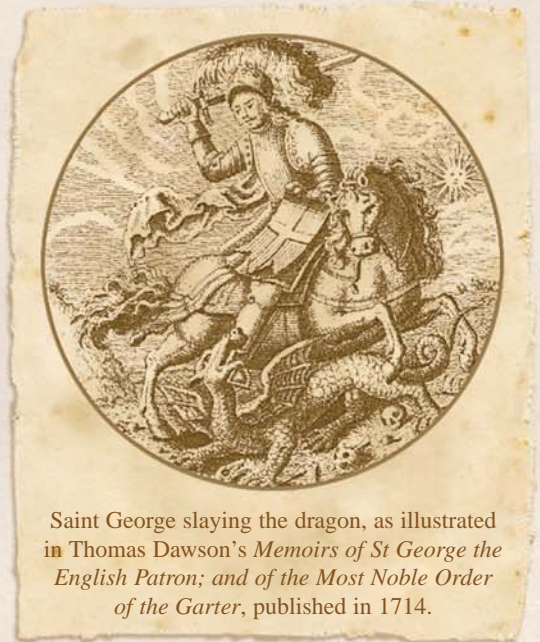


Regardless of his generosity towards the *Welsh Cross*, Edward III was not averse to accruing more treasure at every opportunity, some approaches being rather amusing to the modern reader perusing the official records of his reign: 'Among the Acts in 1329, there is an Order dated the 9th of May at Eltham, to bring to the King, by fair means or by force, two men who boasted of their Art to make Silver; and it seems that the King intended to set them at work for himself'. How successful these two alchemists were is not mentioned, but his majesty may have had better luck in issuing mineral rights in the West Country in 1338, when he granted 'permission to dig in the County of Devon for Mines of Gold and Silver'.<sup>8</sup> King Edward reserved for himself one third of whatever turned up.

The king was probably keen to keep a close eye on the treasured relic from Wales, since in 1328 he had been obliged under a treaty to return to Scotland another great symbol of his grandfather's military activities: 'He gave up also to them the piece of the Cross of Christ, which the Scots call the Blackrood, and likewise an instrument or charter of subjection or doing homage to the kings of England, with the seals of all the magnates of Scotland hanging to it'. However, 'the Stone of Scone, whereon the kings of Scotland were wont to be placed at their coronation, the Londoners would by no means send away'.<sup>9</sup> Other records show that Edward III was certainly keeping a close eye on the Black Rood, which was in English hands once more. At the Battle of Neville's Cross near Durham in 1346, the Scots army was heavily defeated, and then the English Crown took possession of the Black Rood again. A *Treasury Memorandum* of the 7th of January 1346 mentions how the 'black Rood of Scotland was taken from the Tower of London and delivered to Walter de Wetwang, keeper of the wardrobe, to be kept by the king's side'.<sup>10</sup>

Like his grandfather who looted it from Edinburgh in 1296, Edward III was evidently a great admirer of this particular relic, as he was of his grandfather, whose tomb in Westminster Abbey he would drape with cloth of gold on each anniversary of his death. As to the Black Rood's appearance, there are few descriptions in the contemporary records. In his 12th-century *Genealogy of the Kings of the English*, the Cistercian Abbot Aelred of Rievaulx Abbey in North Yorkshire described the figure of Jesus on this crucifix (Old English – *rood*) as being made of ivory. As to the descriptive use of 'black' in its name, the abbot's account provides nothing suggesting such colouring. However, a paper<sup>11</sup> published in 2017 postulates that the word may derive from an Anglo-Saxon (Old English) root, an adjective suggesting something that shines and is splendid in appearance, both of which would apply to the precious metals of which the cross itself was made. Couple this with the fact that its erstwhile owner, Queen Margaret of Scotland, was the great niece of Edward the Confessor, with a lineage from the royal family of Anglo-Saxon Wessex, the otherwise inexplicable 'black' may have nothing to do with the artefact's colouring after all. Inside was contained a piece of the True Cross, which Aelred said could be revealed by opening the object. King Edward I's inventory of 1307 says it was kept in a box gilded with silver.

The successors to Edward I are often referred to by their places of birth, the second Edward having been born at Caernarfon and the third at Windsor. Evidently, Edward III was especially attached to Windsor Castle, and the extensively refurbished chapel there was to become the next resting-place of the *Welsh Cross* during this king's reign. The chapel itself was originally built in the reign of Henry III and dedicated to the Plantagenet's much-favoured Edward the Confessor, but the spiritual focus was shifted to Saint George by Edward III. This saint is invariably portrayed (pictured above) spearing a red dragon – the ancient ensign of Wales. It was just an ironic coincidence of history in Windsor Castle, yet Llywelyn the Great and the Welsh



Saint George slaying the dragon, as illustrated in Thomas Dawson's *Memoirs of St George the English Patron; and of the Most Noble Order of the Garter*, published in 1714.

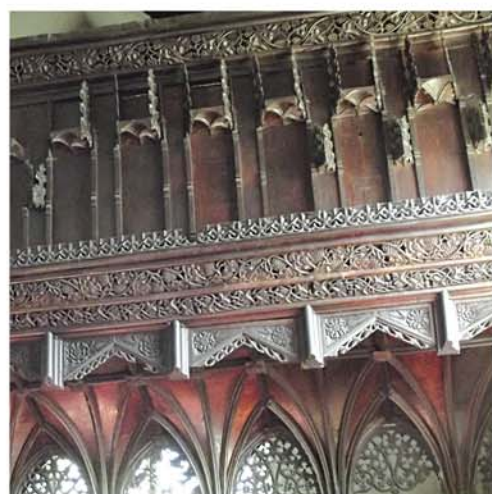


## Gwydir Chapel

Believed to be the sarcophagus (left) of Llywelyn the Great, it now lies empty in the Gwydir Chapel at the church in Llanrwst. No one knows what became of Llywelyn's remains. It was originally in Aberconwy Abbey and is thought to have been removed to Maenan when the monks relocated under the orders of Edward I.



The finely carved rood screen (right) in the church is also thought to have been brought from the abbey around 1537.



The tomb effigy is of Hywel Coetmor, a descendent of Llywelyn and a heroic figure from the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. The chapel also contains many fine wood carvings.



generally would have perceived the symbolic poignancy of the Gwynedd relic's new home, and that heraldic device of England's patron saint.

All that remains of Llywelyn lies in the Gwydir Chapel in the parish church of Llanrwst, the sarcophagus (pictured opposite) in which it is claimed he was entombed at Aberconwy Abbey. The quatrefoil recesses once contained '*coats of arms of brass gilt and enamel*'. These were prised off for scrap in the Cromwellian era, according to a manuscript of 1684, recounting the Duke of Beaufort's journey through Wales. During the Welsh wars Edward I and his troops wore the red cross of Saint George, echoing the livery of crusader knights and in particular the Templars. The *Ledger Book of Vale Royal Abbey* says of this abbey's royal founder that Edward, as a crusader '*in every battle round his bare neck he bore with him the most sacred ensign of Christ*'. This king obviously saw the conquest of Wales as something of a personal crusade in itself, although there was not a Saracen to be seen in Gwynedd. In 1285 Longshanks presented a gold figure of Saint George to Canterbury, probably as a thanks-giving gesture for his military victories over the Welsh.

Equally boosted by military success, Edward III returned from France and his famous victories. In August 1348 he issued *Letters Patent* establishing by endowment the College of Saint George at Windsor Castle. Here the great chapel was to become the spiritual home of the Knights of the Garter, a chivalric fraternity that was created sometime between 1344 and 1351, the precise date being the subject of much continuing debate. In 1349 the king had petitioned Pope Clement VI regarding the new college at Windsor, and in 1350 the pope granted privileges, including exemption from ordinary jurisdiction, thereby making it the king's free chapel. Detailed accounts of the extensive work at Windsor during 1350-51 record that five shillings was spent on making an image of Saint George for the chapel, so that shows that the king's focus of attention in that regnal year – if not before – was certainly occupied with this saint and his role in the chapel at Windsor, the insignia of the Garter Knights being the red cross associated with Saint George.

Like his grandfather, this Edward idealised King Arthur and in 1344 he had arranged a Round Table event, an international tournament at Windsor that had cost a small fortune. Edward III obviously had the money, having just redeemed the '*Magna Corona*' (Great Crown) that had been pawned in 1339 with the archbishop of Trier for over a hundred thousand gold florins, enabling the king to fund his military aspirations in Europe. Although a costly business, warfare could be seriously profitable too, with seizures of treasure and the income from ransoms demanded for captured members of the nobility. Edward's victories in France at Crecy (1346), Poitiers (1356) and elsewhere would have swelled the royal coffers. So, he set about lavishing his wealth on the chapel that was to become the special place of ceremony and worship for the Knights of the Garter.

Edward III's enthusiastic approach to the potent symbol of the Arthurian Round Table found him engaged in quite lavish expenditure, as observed in the *Annals of Windsor*, published in 1858: '*In January 1344, the king caused to be impressed carpenters, masons, and carriages, for erecting a particular building in the castle, and therein placed a table of two hundred feet diameter, where the knights should have their entertainment of diet at his expense of £100 a week, to which building he gave the name of the Round Table*'.<sup>12</sup> The anonymous continuation in the 13th-century chronicle of Adam de Murimuth noted that Edward's plans were to be '*in the same manner and condition as the lord Arthur, formerly King of England*'. Although the Round Table building itself was never completed, many craftsmen and labourers were '*impressed*' or bound to work on the extensive Windsor project for the king. There was a great scarcity of labourers at the time, due to the devastating mortality of Bubonic Plague (the 'Black Death'), which eventually wiped out nearly half the population of England.

The records of the period provide an insight into how desperate the king had become for skilled labour, the *Close Rolls* illustrating the severity of this shortage of craftsmen. Drastic measures were put in place and Edward issued heavy threats when contacting the sheriffs of Oxford, Northampton and Bedford, who were told to arrest any masons '*who are rebellious herein and detain them in prison [...] as the king*



*requires many workmen for those works*' (Close Rolls 5th January 1360). Addressing the sheriff at York it was noted that the masons '*are for the most part dead of the last plague, so that the king has need of more*' (Close Rolls 30th March 1362).

The monarch's legislation at the time imposed heavy penalties on the surviving tradesmen seeking to capitalise on their new-found negotiating base, and, as recorded in Rymer's *Foedera*, on the 18th of June 1350 the king forbade them from inflating their charges. Wages at the time ranged from three pence a day for carpenters and four pence for stone masons, with general labourers getting one penny a day. In spite of the 'Great Pestilence' as the plague was also known, the payments to the dwindling labour force were rigidly controlled, especially so for those working on the king's ambitious plans at Windsor Castle.

This major building enterprise absorbed considerable resources, as the Windsor annals noted: '*The Prior of Merton was paid £26.13s.4d. in full satisfaction of money for fifty-two oaks, taken from his woods near Reading, for the Round Table at Windsor*'. Originally, Edward had in mind a Round Table for three hundred knights, but his aspirations developed and changed into a less ambitious number. As his Arthurian-inspired ideas evolved, the Order of the Garter was created, restricted to twenty-four knights plus the king himself. The final choice of this figure is likely to be related to the 'Arthurian' Winchester Round Table, with its seating arrangement for twenty-five individuals. When Edward petitioned Pope Clement VI in 1349, regarding his new enterprise, he said he intended to have twenty-four priests, and the same number of 'poor knights', disadvantaged individuals who would have accommodation and sustenance for their support. The king's work at Windsor continued its costly course, with over £3,000 being expended in 1364 alone, a bill for lead roofing materials the previous year amounting to more than £900.<sup>13</sup>

Exactly when Edward III formally presented the *Welsh Cross* at the College of Saint George at Windsor remains uncertain, since there do not appear to be any contemporary documents recording when he transferred it from the Tower. There is, however, a revealing document from the records of the exchequer (*Pipe Rolls* 198/34, 27 Edward III), which notes that, '*among the jewels normally kept in the privy wardrobe was the famous "Croice Gnaythe," which was preserved in a coffer*'.<sup>14</sup> This document from the regnal year 1353-54 makes it perfectly clear that the *Welsh Cross* was still kept in the Tower of London at that time, so it could only have been permanently transferred to Windsor shortly afterwards, and not before as has been widely assumed. The fact that Edward III made oblation of five shillings to the *Welsh Cross* on the 2nd of September 1351 (*Privy Purse* expenses) at Windsor has led to the assumption that the treasured relic had been installed at Windsor by that date. According to the *Queen's Cofferer's Accounts* (25 Edward III), Philippa also made oblation to the relic on that occasion. The information in the *Pipe Rolls* specifically shows that the *Welsh Cross* was kept in the Tower at that point in time, and, in any event, we have enough examples of the king travelling with the relic to various locations, including Windsor Castle, before 1354.

It was in 1354 that Pope Innocent VI responded to Edward's petitions in connection with his royal chapel at Windsor, which, being free of the ordinary jurisdiction of an archbishop or bishop, was immediately subject to the Apostolic See itself. The king had sought to obtain a papal relaxation of penance for those engaged in divine worship in the chapel. In his original petition to Pope Clement VI (pontificate 1342-1352) he had asked for an indulgence of three years and three quadragene (i.e. three times forty days), particularly for those in the chapel on specified feast days, including the Exaltation of the Holy Cross on the 14th September. Perhaps Pope Innocent (pontificate 1352-1362) was feeling less than generous, because this new pope only granted two years and two quadragene, although he did add in the papal grant '*out of love of the king*'.

The papal grant of 1354 makes specific reference to the *Welsh Cross*: '*there is a cross adorned with gems from the wood of the Saviour's cross, a piece of great length which Saint Helen brought with her own hands and destined for Britain, now called England*'.<sup>15</sup> The information about the artefact would have been given to the papacy in the king's petition, although it is possible that Rome was aware of the relic from previous communications, perhaps through a papal legate's visit to the English court, or even from much



earlier contact with Gwynedd's royal family. The connection made between Constantine's mother, her discovery of the True Cross and Britain arose in the *History of England* (c.1129) by Henry of Huntingdon, in reference to Colchester, and it was then repeated by Geoffrey of Monmouth. These are the sources for the information quoted in the papal grant, and they were widely regarded as being 'historical fact' at the time.

The origin of this particular relic was, of course, Wales, but the papal grant makes no reference to this fact. Could this be another illustration of the now all too familiar conflation issue surrounding Constantine's mother and Saint Elen from Gwynedd? Elen's sainthood within the Celtic Church was not endorsed by Rome, and while King Edward III would have known that his grandfather had acquired the object as war booty in Wales seventy years earlier, he would have accepted the Anglo-Norman chroniclers' version of events. And he was probably quite unaware of Saint Elen anyway, and possibly also the point about the relic's actual provenance having been beyond the recall of memory among its Welsh royal owners by the 1280s. Edward III was certainly aware of Llywelyn's daughter Gwenllïan at the priory in Lincolnshire, since he granted her a pension of twenty pounds to be paid by the local sheriff from the county's funds in 1327.

So what did the *Welsh Cross* look like around this time? There are precious few detailed descriptions before this period, so we can only rely on what is briefly mentioned in state documents and the old chronicles. Of these the important *Chronicle of Lanercost* may well be the most reliable and informative, since it is possible, even likely that the anonymous writer from the priory could have actually seen the relic during Edward I's quite lengthy stays at Lanercost. These included some six months during 1306-7, when the king was in terminally poor health. We know from the records that Edward had it with him and such an object would have aroused much curiosity, if not active reverence during his time there. The previously quoted description from Lanercost says it was a '*most beautiful piece of the Holy Cross, carved into a portable cross*'. The use of the word '*portable*' is simply alluding to the fact that it was kept in Edward's portable chapel when he was travelling on campaign.

We know that the royal house of Gwynedd particularly patronised the Cistercian Order, which has its origins in 11th-century France. The order's subsequent rapid expansion developed under the influence of the abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), and he played a major role in the growth of the Knights Templar. Like the Cistercian monks generally, these knights sought to follow the Rule of Saint Benedict, pursuing a more simple devotional life than that prevailing in some other monastic orders at the time. As is well known, the Templars became 'warrior monks' in the Holy Land, and their claimed discoveries there are the stuff of legends, as well as many modern books with a 'conspiracy theory' theme.

In a recent study of Templar families by Jochen Schenk, the author emphasises how these knights were responsible for returning from crusade in the Holy Land with relics, especially those associated with Christ's so-called passion, inevitably including fragments of the True Cross. One Templar in particular, known simply as Artaud, is said to have returned with sacks full of relics. Artaud deposited these at Clairvaux and he then became a member of the Cistercian monastic community. An inventory of 1504 records that several cross fragments were in the collection at Clairvaux. Another French Templar, Count Guige of Nevers and Forez, obtained a piece of the True Cross from the Templars' Grand Master, and he gave it to his son before being killed on crusade in 1241. The same study also records that a fragment of the True Cross was delivered to England in 1272, along with a relic of Saint Helen, that being the year in which Henry III died and was succeeded by his son Edward.

If we consider that the *Welsh Cross* may have been kept in reverence in a Cistercian house in Gwynedd – perhaps Aberconwy or Cymmer Abbey – then there is the problem of a particular requirement of that monastic order. Their rules insisted that simple wooden crosses were acceptable, whereas highly decorated ones, including crucifixes were not. Assuming that the rule was strictly adhered to in Gwynedd, then the *Welsh Cross* may not have been installed in a house of the Cistercian Order, unless it was a far simpler object than we picture it now. If so, then its richly embellished and bejeweled appearance was all the handiwork of Edward I after he took it to England. It has generally been assumed that, because it was



# Bettws y Grog ~ Chapel of the Cross



The area highlighted on the 19th-century map (left) of Anglesey by Samuel Lewis is featured below on John Speed's map of 1610, where the chapel is described as 'Kirghhiog'.



All that remains today of this ancient chapel is a walled enclosure, containing some scattered masonry and the base of a monumental cross, as shown in the photograph below.



The rounded corners of the walled enclosure are unusual and reminiscent of Britain's early Roman forts.



presented to Edward I at Aberconwy Abbey, it was there that the *Welsh Cross* resided, but there is no evidence for this in any contemporary sources, whether from Wales or England. The *Register and Chronicle of Aberconway* is contained in a 14th-century manuscript, compiled at the Cistercian monastery of Hailes in Gloucestershire, but it makes no claims that Aberconwy housed the *Welsh Cross*. The passing references to the artefact in this source are simply repetitions of the now familiar brief statements in other chronicles, like those by Rishanger and also the *Annals of Waverley Abbey*. As was the custom and practice at the time, manuscripts simply circulated between ecclesiastical institutions, where hand-written copies would be made for the monastic library.

Some early sources tell us that it was Helen's own large piece of the True Cross, and given that she was Emperor Constantine's mother, the embellished relic may have originally been produced in Constantinople, as were so many Byzantine Christian artefacts, all of which tended to be highly decorative objects. The major difficulty then becomes its design: the Celtic Cross form was not a Byzantine stylistic feature. None of the contemporary sources tell us about its overall shape. Was it, for example, a Celtic Cross when it left Wales in the 1280s? On the balance of probability, this design feature seems likely to have been the case at that time for two reasons: one, it came from Celtic Wales and two, Edward I is unlikely to have had any reason for adding a circular element to the simple, standard Latin form of a cross. If nothing else, it would have taken a lot more gold and jewel embellishment. In Arnold Taylor's 1976 study, *Royal Alms and Oblations in the Later 13th Century*, the historian noted that in 1292-3 the *Pipe Roll* for that regnal year records £104 being spent by Edward I on precious stones for the 'pedestal' or base of the *Welsh Cross*. Then in 1296 this king contributed even more jewels during its 'refashioning and embellishment', using valuable gems from a royal coronet provided for work on the '*Crucis neeth*'. This shows that the object underwent a considerable redesign while in Edward's possession, but nothing is known of its appearance before he took it from Wales, or what it looked like after this particular 'refashioning'.

So, just where was the *Welsh Cross* kept before it left for England? One possibility is the stronghold of Dolwyddelan Castle, which certainly held some of Gwynedd's royal treasure. This is recorded in a document of 1283 in which there is a list of grievances against the late Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, submitted to King Edward by disgruntled Welsh community leaders, who were seeking the reinstatement of their traditional customs and rights. Clause thirteen of this '*Gravamina*' as it is known, complains that Llywelyn would not draw on the treasure he had stashed in Dolwyddelan Castle, while at the same time heavily taxing these people during the war years.

Another possibility is that the treasured relic was kept at one of Gwynedd's royal palaces, perhaps Aberffraw on Anglesey. This major palace complex was largely demolished early in the reign of Edward II, the timber being shipped over to the castle building site at Caernarfon in 1317. In an isolated field a few miles north of where this palace once stood, there are the slight remains of a very ancient religious building, known as the Chapel of the Cross (Welsh *Bettws y Grog*). All that we see today is the surrounding walled enclosure (pictured opposite on page 191), and also the remaining foundations of what was once a remarkably small building. The dedication to 'The Cross' is itself unusual, there being only two other such dedications among churches, both of which are in the south of Wales. The Bettws y Grog site is in the parish of Ceirchiog, which was thought in the 1500s to mean that the place was *abounding* (Welsh *heigiog*) in the cultivation of oats (Welsh *ceirch*). The *Itinerary* (1770 edition) of the 16th-century John Leland refers to the parish as 'ygheirckrog', an unusual spelling of the name that could be a combined reference to both oats and a cross (Welsh *crog/grog*), with the Y placed at the front of the word to denote the definite article, 'the' in English. The letter K is not used in the Welsh alphabet, so its use by Leland in 'ygheirckrog' is somewhat redundant in this context.

Turning next to another antiquary, the Anglesey-born Henry Rowlands of a century or so later, we find him undertaking considerable research into the parochial history of the island, the outcome being a Latin manuscript entitled *Antiquitates Parochiales*, which was published in the journal *Archaeologia Cambrensis* in



1846. In this text Rowlands describes in great detail the families and properties of Anglesey, drawing upon ancient genealogies, deeds and other old documents. He was also a man with a sound knowledge of local agriculture, and he gives brief observations on the crop cultivation in each parish, enumerated in detail in his study. With very few exceptions, oats were cultivated in great abundance throughout Anglesey, and detailed research into *Thirteenth-century Farm Economics in North Wales*, published in 1968, makes it perfectly clear that oats were very widely cultivated in both Anglesey and the mainland area of Arfon, and particularly on the Lleyn Peninsula.

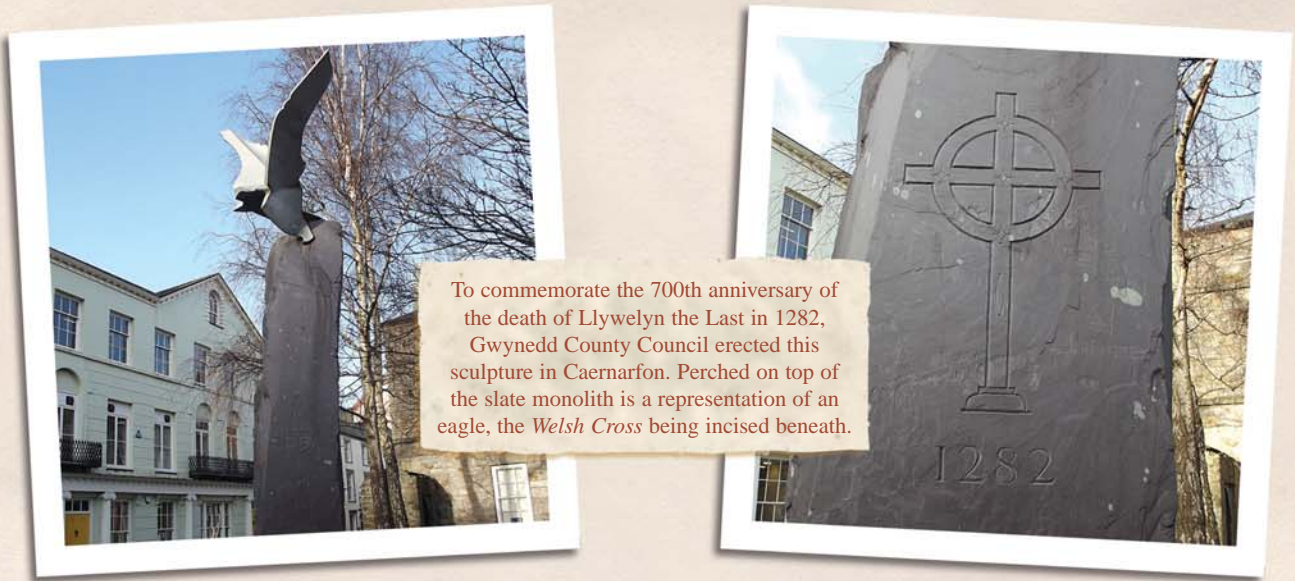
All this leads to a question: why would 'Ceirchiog' be so distinctively named? And what was the place called before it abounded in oats? As so often happened over the centuries, place-names became corrupted, and this may have happened here, with the parish name originally deriving from that of its church, Bettws y Grog, which was finally abandoned as a place of worship in the 1830s. While Leyland gives the place-name as meaning 'abounding with oats', this same phrase appears in Owen Pughe's dictionary (1832) as represented by the Welsh word 'ceirchlyd', suggesting that the parish name may have been corrupted. Could the ancient and now long-lost Chapel of the Cross, near Aberffraw, have once been the home of the *Welsh Cross* itself? This is all highly speculative etymology, so it is time to turn to more reliable sources of information.

What happened to the *Welsh Cross* in 1351-52/3 is stated in great detail in the records of the time – it went for an extravagant make-over. Edward III handed it to his goldsmith, Richard de Grimsby, a craftsman who had previously been appointed master of the archbishop's mint at York in 1331, and who was now engraving dies for the king's seals. This goldsmith's work on the *Welsh Cross* is specified in an account of the materials used and the costs involved in a document in the National Archives.<sup>16</sup> In May of 1351 Edward's treasurer handed over nearly £250 worth of 24-carat gold to the master and his craftsmen, who included goldsmiths and silversmiths from abroad. Master Richard also received some £16 'worth of broken silver vessels on two occasions' for recycling purposes. The total value of gold and silver amounted to several hundred pounds, and then there were sixty-four rubies and emeralds, plus 'the said Richard has bought 34 pearls for the said Cross for 11s.4d.'. There is no mention of a sapphire in this highly detailed document, so that particular gemstone listed in the inventory of 1338-39 was not included in this work.

A new 'foot' or base was specially made for the *Welsh Cross*, again comprising gold, silver and valuable stones. The precious metal and gemstones for the new base were recycled from a gold coffer, a chalice and a richly decorated cope, along with some gold from a belt belonging to the king. Another source of materials for this new base is recorded among the *Close Rolls 1343-46* of Edward III, the circumstances involving a Luke Nicholyn, who had been appointed in 1344 as Master of the Royal Mint in the Tower of London. It appears that his career had taken a turn for the worse by 1351, when the *Welsh Cross* was poised for its refashioning. These records show King Edward demanding that Nicholyn was 'not to intermeddle further with the office', and an indenture made between the treasury and London's Lord Mayor, John Lovekyn makes reference to treasure being removed from 'the lot' of Nicholyn and transferred to a jewel hamper in the king's treasury. On the 28th of March 1351 the contents were handed over to the king's goldsmith at the Tower 'to make therefrom the foot of the cross which is called Croys Neyth'. In December 1352 the goldsmith was receiving further payments from the Exchequer of Receipt for making the foot, which, presumably, had been completed by then.

The record of Richard de Grimsby gives the total cost of all expenses as £568.8s.9d. In addition to the costs or values of the materials, this record names the various craftsmen and the amounts paid to each for work on the *Welsh Cross*, and what is especially striking are the periods of time each worker spent on the artefact. These varied considerably but it certainly took many months to complete the work, although, unfortunately, no actual completion date is given. Most of the dates provided in the document refer simply to when materials were provided and payments made to Richard de Grimsby. Also mentioned in this source is an expense of thirty-six shillings for transporting it from the workshop in London to Windsor on two occasions.





Unfortunately, no dates for these deliveries are given. We can reasonably assume that the second occasion was when the artefact was complete and finished, but what of the first occasion? Could this have been to enable the king and queen to venerate and pay oblation to the '*Croice Neit*' at Windsor on the 2nd of September 1351? At that time it is likely to have been a 'work in progress', as also was the great chapel at Windsor, but Richard and his craftsmen could have made it perfectly presentable for the occasion. And it would still have included the most spiritually important element, the large piece of the True Cross contained within it.

This record also says that, '*the said Richard received £13.6s.8d to purchase an eagle for the said Cross Neit*', the payment date being given as the 27th of April 1352. There is no eagle shown in the only known images of the *Welsh Cross* at Windsor, but these portrayals in the two ceiling bosses are of a much later date. The treasured cross had certainly been refashioned again after Richard de Grimsby's work under Edward III, since an inventory from 1534, in the reign of Henry VIII, refers to sapphires ('*saffers*') as garnishing the *Welsh Cross*. The jewels specified in Richard de Grimsby's detailed record does not include sapphires. The medieval jewellers' use of an ornamental eagle in connection with a cross was not unusual, and records from the 1420s, in the reign of Henry VI, illustrate this: '*on the top of the said cross a white eagle enamelled*'.<sup>17</sup> However, this particular 15th-century cross was not the *Welsh Cross*, which in Edward III's time was invariably referred to in the records as the '*Cross Neit*', or something similar. As the 'king of birds' the eagle ideally represented monarchs and was widely used for its symbolic value in heraldry and elsewhere, so the eagle incorporated on the *Welsh Cross* in the 1350s continued to express this royal symbolism. In *The Dream of Macsen Wledig* from the *Mabinogion*, Elen's father Eudaf is described as being seated on a throne of ivory, '*with the figures of two eagles of ruddy gold thereon*'.

Coincidentally, an eagle appears on a modern sculpture (pictured above) that celebrates Llywelyn the Last and the *Welsh Cross* in Caernarfon, where Edward I's castle includes the Eagle Tower. The 18th-century antiquary, Thomas Pennant recorded that this king had found a sculptured eagle in the Roman site of Segontium and had it placed on the tower. Many believe that the Welsh name of Eryri for the Snowdon area means the Place of the Eagles, although the birds were driven to extinction at some point. They were still present in the 17th-century, as evidenced from an account left by a botanist, Thomas Johnson when he was plant hunting in 1639. He and his colleagues had engaged the services of a local guide and were ascending the Snowdonian mountain called Carnedd Llywelyn. Concern was expressed about disturbing the nesting eagles, said by their guide to harass sheep to fall from the crags to their deaths below, where the birds then made a meal of them. The visiting botanists were obviously anxious not to share in this fate.

The great expense lavished on the *Welsh Cross* is clearly a measure of the high esteem in which this relic was held by Edward III, just as it had been by Edward I. Edward II, on the other hand, may not have



been too attached to it, since he had broken his solemn oath made upon it in 1307. As a consequence this king would have been only too aware how this faithless act could imperil his soul, such notions as oath-taking on relics being considered a serious matter in those deeply religious times. To break such an oath was treated as perjury, and in theory only the pope could release someone from their oath. It could, however, be nullified if the individual made the oath under duress, or it contravened a previous oath. In the case of the Scots prelates, who ignored their oaths made on the *Welsh Cross* and the Black Rood at the insistence of Edward I, they obviously saw their spiritual commitment to Scotland as superseding an oath made to an English king in a time of war.

Edward III's costly investment in the *Welsh Cross* does rather beg the question, why was it necessary to undertake this major and costly work? Perhaps a simple answer is one of changing tastes in the appearance of such treasured objects, or it may have been previously despoiled in the reign of Edward II. He was much given to lavishing jewels and the like on those in his favour and, as we now know, Piers Gaveston had a taste for luxury goods like gemstones.

Since Edward III's goldsmith transformed the *Welsh Cross* between 1351-53, we may reasonably presume that he did so prior to its permanent installation at the chapel in Windsor. It seems implausible that the king would have installed it before then, and thereafter have taken it back to London for the major work by Richard de Grimsby, whose input was clearly intended to render it a magnificent focus of divine worship in Windsor's chapel. And, of course, the chapel itself was something of a building site up until around 1355, so the king is hardly likely to have deposited it amongst all those masons and carpenters, who were busily engaged in the chapel's transformation. New windows for the chapel were still being made and installed in 1352-53. Major building work was also going on elsewhere within the confines of Windsor Castle itself and these continued into the 1360s.

Eventually installed in Saint George's Chapel on an altar, the *Welsh Cross* became an object of worship for pilgrims and the like, all of whom said their prayers before it and paid their donations. This particular cross is recorded as the '*Chief Treasure*' and was obviously a good money-spinner. The treasurer's accounts record the funds as '*Oblaciones Capelle de Crois Neit*'. Could the newly enriched *Welsh Cross* have been taken from the goldsmith's workshop to Windsor in time for the Garter Knights' feast of 1353? The records<sup>18</sup> tell us that Edward III made oblations to the chapel's relics during the vigil of Saint George, but the *Welsh Cross* itself is not mentioned in this particular source, suggesting that it may not have been present on that occasion. Given that the records of such events and activities invariably mention the artefact by name, it is possible that it was still in London. Obviously, the only records available to us today are limited to those that have survived the ravages of time.

Among the later records of Edward III's oblations, specifically mentioning the *Welsh Cross*, is one from 1370: '*there is an account extant of John de Ippe, comptroller of the wardrobe, wherein mention is made of offerings by the king at high mass, in adoring the cross Neyt, on the eve of St. George's feast, and on the morrow at the mass of requiem*'.<sup>19</sup> Records from two years later show Edward making another oblation with a coin called a 'gold noble' to the '*Crucem Neit*', during the Garter Knights' festivities of 1372. First issued during his reign, this coin was worth 6s.8d. and represented half a mark in monetary terms. It also represents a modest inflationary increase on the five shillings of earlier oblations to the relic from Wales.

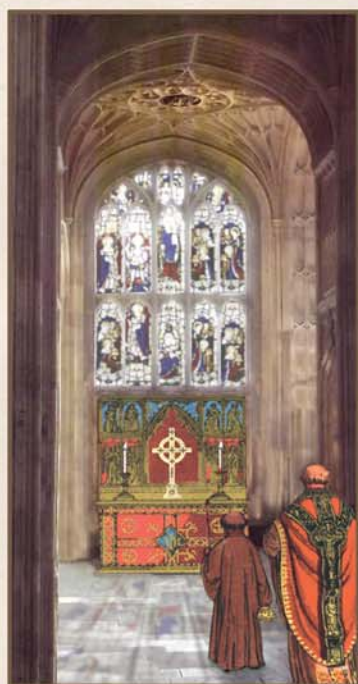
With all these valuable items in the chapel security was inevitably an issue. The college's accounts for 1386 record a Thomas Gerneys being paid two pennies for keeping an eye on the chapel's relics, openly





venerated on the feast of Saint John the Baptist (24th June). Three Sundays later the *'feast of the relics'* was celebrated, an event that also involved using – rather oddly – a gallon of wine for washing the relics themselves. In 1387 this Thomas Gerneys is again recorded as being paid two pennies for guarding a cross, although it is not stated that this was the *Welsh Cross*, which is invariably named in the accounts as the *'Cross called Neyth'*, or some similar translation of these Latin records. Given that the chapel's *'chief treasure'* was actually a possession of the Crown, the Dean at Windsor is more than likely to have wanted it closely watched during the various feast day celebrations, investing two pennies seeming to be a wise precaution.

The chapel's various relics were on display above or behind the high altar in what is termed a reredos, which often consisted of a lavish and decorated item of ecclesiastical furniture, sometimes sculptural in appearance. The one that Edward III commissioned for Windsor's chapel was made of alabaster in Nottingham and was clearly a very substantial and expensive reredos. A total of ten carts each pulled by eight horses transported it from Nottingham to Windsor, where it was then assembled in the chapel in 1367.



Inventories from the time refer to the *Welsh Cross* as being displayed in a niche in this reredos, surrounded by other relics and reliquaries, all richly adorned with precious metals and jewels. At some point in time the *Welsh Cross* was moved from its place in the high altar reredos to what is described as the *'Capelle de Crois Neit'*. The likelihood is that this 'chapel' was somewhere at the end of the south choir aisle, forming a specific area for devotion to the *Welsh Cross* alone. The illustration on the left is an imaginary depiction of how this may have looked. A reason for this speculative suggestion relates to a ceiling boss in that location from after the time of Edward III, but we shall focus on that possibility later in more detail. In the meantime, what can we learn of the Order of the Garter and its relationship with the *Welsh Cross*?

The installation of a new knight to the Order of the Garter was a lengthy affair, the ceremony involving procedures that had to be strictly adhered to throughout. The formal and ritualised process in the chapel involved the initiate in declaring his oath on each and every specified *'poynte and so kyssed the Booke and after the Holly Crosse'*.<sup>20</sup> And not turning up for the annual grand feast was especially taboo, the penalty being that the knight would have to *'walk alone by himself before three crosses, which, in ancient time, were born in the Grand Procession'*,<sup>21</sup> and then humbly seek forgiveness from the king, or his deputy, at the next feast. Subsequent failure to attend the feast imposed even more stringent and costly penalties: *'he hath given and offered a Jewel unto St. George's Altar, within the said Chapel, of the Value of Twenty Marks of Silver, and from thence forward he shall double every Year the Penalty, unto the Time he be reconciled'*.<sup>22</sup> Such missed appointments would certainly have enriched the coffers of this establishment, while impoverishing the late-comers.

As well as reigning monarchs and their sons, Garter Knights included such luminaries as a Holy Roman Emperor in the 1400s: *'that Sigismunde the Emperoure shoulde be gratified with a Garter, whoe to requite that courtesie, gave a most precious relique to St. George's Chappel, even the verie harte of St. George himselfe'*.<sup>23</sup> A rather ghoulish gift but no doubt this relic brought in funds through oblations made to it, following its donation in 1416. The same source tells us that it was not all just prayers and offerings at the altar in the chapel: *'people gadded hither on pilgrimage, being perswaded that a smalle chippe of his [the king's] bedsteade (which was kepte heare) was a precious relique, and that to put upon a man's heade an olde red velvet hatte of his (that laye theare) was a sovereigne medicine against head-ache'*. Although published in the 18th-century, this observation about activities at Saint George's Chapel was actually written in the 1570s by William Lambarde, a keen antiquary and lawyer in the reign of Elizabeth I.



Endowments of land and income from various estates were made for the benefit of the College of Saint George, including the financial resources of assorted churches, chapels and priories, such as the Priory of Saint Elen in the Isle of Wight. One of the more curious endowments recorded in the *Annals of Windsor* was from the Corporation of Yarmouth, a grant made by the town's bailiffs in the regnal year of 1352-53 of Edward III: '*red herrings yearly, well dried and cleansed*'. Yarmouth's leaders hoped that the college would include them in their prayers. It appears that the poorer brethren of the college, the 'alms-knights' as they were known, vehemently argued with the Dean that they too should have their fair share of the herrings; it was quite a commotion at the time. This annual shipment of fish to Windsor went on until 1718, when the college decided they would rather have money instead of herrings, and the cash payment went on until the 1860s.

Edward III maintained his commitment to Saint George's Chapel throughout his long reign, and in his forty-sixth year on the throne he is recorded in an *Issue Roll* as paying 300 marks for an alabaster table to be made for the high altar at Windsor. Like his predecessors, he also engaged in the acquisition of relics of one form or another, and he paid a hundred shillings for a vest that was claimed to have once belonged to the Apostle Peter. After half a century on the throne Edward III died in 1377, having restored royal authority and England's military standing in Europe. King Richard II (1367-1400) then acceded to the throne at the age of ten, and a few years later we find another reference to the *Welsh Cross*, still residing at Windsor. The inventory of the chapel treasures taken in 1384-85 refers to the '*noble cross called Gneth*' still being located in Saint George's Chapel by the reredos; presumably it had yet to be moved to its own chapel ('*Capelle de Crois Neit*') by that time. Whether or not this undated move contributed to the artefact's vulnerability is unknown, but it certainly suffered from time to time, as original documents in the archives of the Dean and Canons of St. George's Chapel so clearly demonstrate.

It appears that Edward III's hefty investment in jewels may have fallen victim to hands that were prying rather than praying. Windsor's accounts record that four pennies were expended in 1387-8 on repairs to the '*crucis vocati Neyth*', as the *Welsh Cross* is referred to in these Latin records. In the inventory of 1384-85 item 116 records that seven precious stones were now missing, six of which could be replaced, but the seventh had been 'lost' somehow. The foot or base of the cross had also suffered, a total of eleven pearls having gone astray, along with three small emeralds bordering the edges of the base. Windsor's accounts also record minor repairs in September 1394, and again in 1407-08 when a goldsmith received six pennies for carrying out repairs to the *Welsh Cross*.

There is also a brief reference to another decorative feature, consisting of roses made of gold, although it is not known from which of several make-overs these particular decorations may date. The portrayal of the *Welsh Cross* in the ceiling boss in the chapel's nave (see illustration opposite on page 198) shows it surrounded with decorative red roses, but this is likely to be a feature just in the boss, rather than reflecting the appearance of the cross itself. The gold roses mentioned in the inventory were probably applied to the body of the cross, or perhaps attached to the pinnacles, none of which are shown in this particular boss. We know that there was an odd number of five pinnacles, so the likelihood is that these were placed either side on the upper quadrants, with the fifth positioned on the top for a balanced appearance, but this is pure guesswork as no visual representations survive.

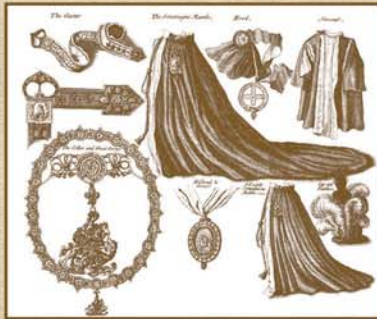
Damage to three of the pinnacles is recorded and the inventory from 1409 mentions two pinnacles had been broken. These five pinnacles were probably a feature of Richard de Grimsby's work, or they may even have been retained from Edward I's refashioning before 1307. This is less likely, however, given the time and costs involved in the work from the early 1350s, when it was substantially remodelled for Edward III in the goldsmith's workshop. By 1410 missing jewels are once more recorded in the Windsor inventories, but there is no way of knowing the circumstances surrounding the various injuries the *Welsh Cross* had suffered over time. The red rose still appears in the decorative gold chain known as the 'collar', worn by Knights of the Garter, and as Saint George's Chapel was their place of worship, this would account for the symbolic usage in the ceiling boss depicting their 'chief treasure' – the *Welsh Cross*.



## The Rose and the Knights of the Garter



This ceiling boss depicting the *Welsh Cross* is in the nave at Saint George's Chapel, and it shows a highly decorative background consisting of red roses, a feature related to the Order of the Knights of the Garter. An item used along with the ceremonial costume, the gold chain draped over the shoulders is known as the 'collar' and it features red roses in its design.



The various items of costume used during the Garter ceremonies at Windsor Castle.

ILLUSTRATION

*The History of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, 1715.*



ILLUSTRATION

W. Bruges, *Garter Book*, c.1430-40.

The last king in the Plantagenet line, Richard II made it his business to take an interest in the income from offerings made in the chapel, and despite his quite fabulous recorded<sup>24</sup> accumulation of treasure generally, he did not see fit to make a substantial contribution to the *Welsh Cross*, judging by the modest four pence that would not have bought much in the 1380s. King Richard is recorded in the *Exchequer Issue Rolls* as adoring the *Welsh Cross* at Windsor on the feast of St. Hadrian on the 8th of September 1395, when his oblation amounted to 6s.8d. The accumulated money made in offerings to the chapel's relics was usually handed over to the king's treasurer, after deductions for 'expenses', but in 1393 King Richard had determined that the income should go instead to the resident Canons of Windsor, since they provided for the hospitality when the king and his court were attending the chapel. This king's noteworthy enthusiasm for jewellery is illustrated in one of the state records (*Issue Roll*, 8 Richard II), where he is recorded as turning up at Westminster: 'upon the secret arrival there of the said Lord the King from his manor of Eltham, to dine and to inspect his jewels.'

The repair and maintenance of royal estates made continual demands on the treasury, including the needs of the properties at Windsor Castle. In July 1389 a new appointment was made for the role of clerk of the king's works and Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343-1400) got the job, the pay being two shillings a day. Chaucer managed to combine his career as a writer with superintending work on the palace at Westminster, the building of the new wharf at the Tower of London and meeting the needs of Saint George's Chapel. Although the position did not last very long, he subsequently received an annual pension from the king.



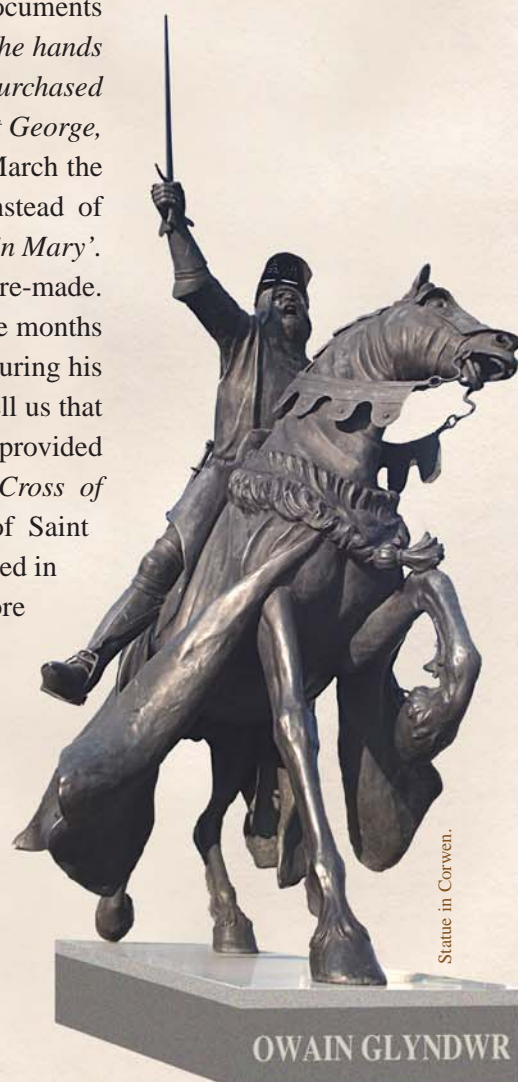
After King Richard II was deposed in 1399, the ascendancy of the House of Lancaster gave England three kings named Henry, but during these reigns the records have little to say about the *Welsh Cross*, mainly because it was no longer kept within the Tower of London or other royal court buildings. There is one brief mention noted in the *Register of the Most Noble Order of the Garter*, which was written in Latin in the 1500s and published in 1724 by its editor, John Anstis (1669-1744). He not only translated much of the text into English but also added many useful notes. Henry IV (1367-1413) is recorded as making an oblation to the '*Crucem de Neyt*' in the fourth year of his reign, the sum of 6s.8d. being handed over in the Chapel of Saint George on the occasion of a feast of Garter Knights in 1402. Such cash donations at these events would have followed an annual pattern at Windsor. Joan of Navarre (c.1368-1437) was Henry's queen and she donated the same sum '*at the cross of the chapel within Leeds Castle*'. This was not the *Welsh Cross*, which does not appear to have travelled at all after being installed in the king's free chapel at Windsor.

Henry IV was probably none too fond of all things Welsh, having had to contend with the fight for freedom led by Owain Glyndwr (c.1350-c.1415) during the first decade or so of the 15th-century. This bid for independence was so challenging that Henry IV issued a writ in 1403 ordering all Welsh people out of Chester (*Recognizance Rolls* 3, 4 Henry IV). No Welshmen were allowed to be in the city '*after sunset, under pain of cutting off his head*', and during the day they were not allowed to carry arms, '*except one little knife for carving his dinner*'. The king obviously did not think that a Welshman could still slit an English throat with his cutlery. Henry's legislation at the time also demanded that no Englishman could be convicted in Wales at the suit of a Welshman, unless by English justices, and only on the evidence given by English burgesses.

The next king was Henry V (1386/7-1422) of Agincourt fame, and like his predecessors he too would have made the obligatory oblations at the altar during the Garter Knights' ceremonies in Saint George's Chapel. He was generously mindful of that noble institution, as state documents (*Issue Roll*, 6 Henry V) show: '*In money paid to the same chamber, by the hands of Conus Melver, goldsmith, for the value of 20lbs.3oz. of silver mass, purchased for repairing an image of the blessed Mary for the king's chapel of Saint George, in Windsor Castle*'. That was in November 1419 and in the following March the same goldsmith was paid £30 for completing the work, although instead of '*repairs*' the record says, '*for making a certain image of the blessed Virgin Mary*'. Presumably, the item was found to be beyond mere repair and had to be re-made.

Henry VI (1421-1471) followed in succession in 1422, just nine months old at the time, and in adulthood he too was preoccupied with warfare during his rather ineffectual and chaotic reign. The only records examined so far tell us that he did have a fleeting, if indirect contact with the *Welsh Cross* when he provided two shillings for the purchase of '*a cloth of red tartaryn for the Cross of Gneygth*'.<sup>25</sup> The king was reimbursing the warden of the College of Saint George for his expenditure. How this piece of rich oriental fabric was used in connection with the relic is unknown, although it was probably little more than a dust cover. Henry was also a collector of relics and he was bequeathed one such treasure by his uncle, the Bishop of Winchester in 1447. It consisted of a '*golden tablet, called the Tablet of Burboyn, containing several relicks of inestimable value, especially of the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ [...] and a fragment of the salutiferous wood of the Cross of our Lord*'. The king subsequently gifted it to '*our Royal College of the blessed Mary of Eton, near Windsor, founded by us*'.<sup>26</sup>

When the House of Lancaster slipped from the throne of England, it was the turn of the House of York, the first of that dynasty being Edward IV (1442-1483), who was crowned in 1461. At this time

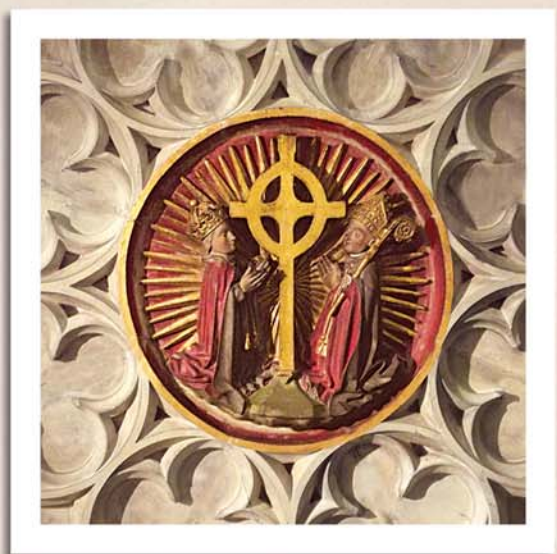




an inspection of the chapel found that the foundations were seriously deteriorating and that the building may be vulnerable to collapse. It was decided that demolition was the only solution, and substantial remodelling of the site occurred, enlarging on the original building's footprint for the new construction. As it was the king's free chapel responsibility rested with the Crown for this massive project, and Edward IV and his queen were generous benefactors. Between 1474 and 1481 they made gifts to the benefit of the Dean and Canons consisting of the income from two priories and eight churches, as well as fourteen manors. There was also the income from the Hospital of St Anthony in London, and it amounted to a sizeable £500 in one year alone.

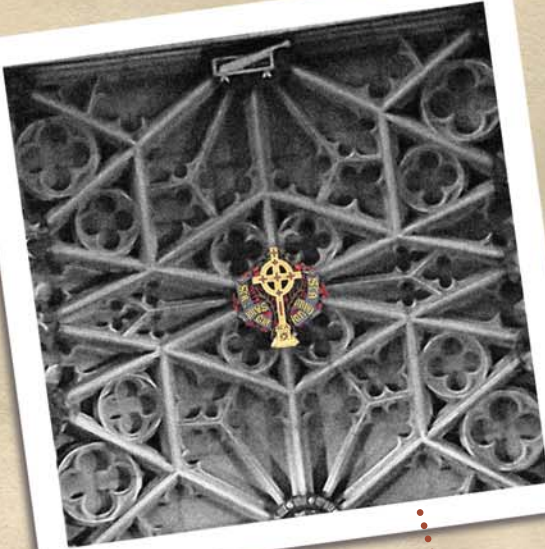
King Edward IV appointed Richard Beauchamp, the Bishop of Salisbury to oversee the project and the work went ahead according to the new grand plans. Although the chapel at Windsor was geographically within the Diocese of Salisbury, it was free of its jurisdiction. Beauchamp was clearly a remarkable individual and he was certainly familiar with relics of the True Cross. Salisbury Cathedral had several bits, including one two inches long, donated to the '*church of Old Sarum* [Salisbury]' in the 1100s, as recorded in an inventory made in 1445. Beauchamp was so highly thought of by the king that he appointed him the first Chancellor of the Order of the Garter in 1475 and Dean in 1478. When they dined at one of the celebratory Garter feasts at Windsor, Beauchamp sat to the right-hand of the king, the ultimate position that any noble of medieval England would have envied. In the king's Will made in 1475, he describes Beauchamp as '*oure right trusty and welbeloved bisshop of Sarum.*' As the king's master and surveyor of the works, Beauchamp occupied a privileged position when work began around 1475, one of his yearly expenses claims being a relatively modest £6.13s.4d. – the Dean at the time claimed £100 for the same period.

When we look up at the vaulted stone work above the easternmost bay in the south choir aisle at the chapel, we see a painted ceiling boss (pictured below), said to depict Edward IV and Bishop Beauchamp kneeling either side of the *Welsh Cross*. It is a decorative feature commemorating a partnership to recreate the chapel that was home to the great relic, removed from Wales some two hundred years earlier. Each figure is seen adoring a Celtic Cross, shown disproportionately large in relation to the king and the bishop, the cross itself being unadorned by jewels and other details. In the background we see the radiating rays of the sun, evoking the illuminating symbolism of Christian iconography. This expresses a medieval invocation of the solar vision of Constantine the Great, shown here with a Celtic flavour. What is especially noteworthy is the very simple design of the base or foot of the cross, as it appears in this particular architectural detail in the ceiling at the far end of the south choir aisle in Saint George's Chapel.

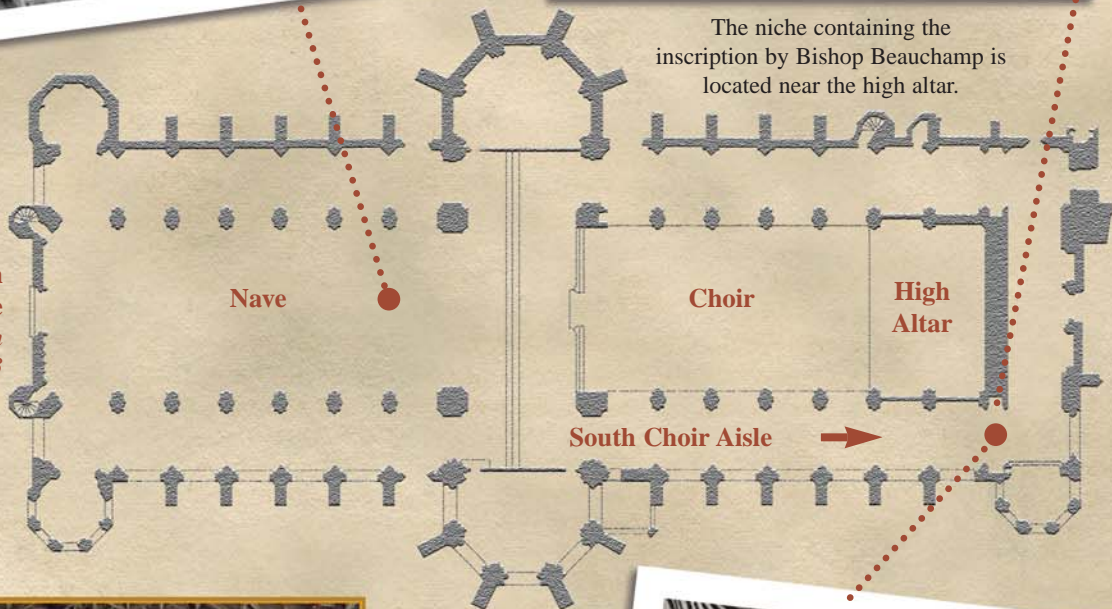


The south choir aisle (above left) and the ceiling boss that appears at the far end of the aisle, close to the window shown in the photograph. An imaginary depiction of this area appears on pages 196 and 201.





Main  
Entrance  
Pictured on  
page 183



The niche containing the  
inscription by Bishop Beauchamp is  
located near the high altar.



How the  
*Capelle de  
Crois Neit*  
may have looked, the  
view point  
being indicated  
on the plan by



The ceiling boss depicting the  
king and the bishop appears directly overhead of the  
niche containing the inscription by Bishop Beauchamp,  
forming a distinct area dedicated to the *Welsh Cross*.



Turning to the other ceiling boss in Saint George's Chapel, this time in the nave, we again find the *Welsh Cross* portrayed (right). This design shows the cross enclosed within a Latin inscription, repeated on either side: 'SCA CRUX SALUS' (Latin *Sancta Crux Salus*), meaning the Holy Cross is our Salvation. In this image we see the cross depicted with jewels, but what is especially significant is the ornate base upon which it stands, a marked contrast to the simple design in the other boss, with the figures of the king and bishop. While it could be argued that the cross with the figures is greatly simplified and stylised for purely practical purposes during carving, it would have been relatively easy for the artisan making it to present the base as a simple square block, derived from the general appearance of the more elaborate presentation of the base in this boss with the Latin inscription. The position of each boss is shown in the plan of Saint George's Chapel on page 201 opposite.



Perhaps artistic license was at work in this difference between the two representations, but this seems unlikely given that those commissioning the craftsmen undertaking the carving would, quite naturally, expect the appearance to be reasonably accurate. However, it could be telling us that the *Welsh Cross* – or at least its base – underwent another, as yet unidentified make-over in the hands of medieval jewellers. Bishop Beauchamp died in 1481 and Edward IV in 1483, and when describing Beauchamp's input, one 19th-century writer observed: '*At the time of Edward IV's death, the eastern portion of the church was roofed, and the choir nearly finished [...] the adjoining compartment at the east end of the south aisle, and corresponding compartment on the north side, and the passage at the back of the altar, are the only portions which could have been executed by Beauchamp*'.<sup>27</sup> This implies that the boss depicting the king and bishop with the *Welsh Cross* in the south aisle may well have been installed shortly before, or around the time of their deaths, perhaps as a commemoration of their spiritually creative alliance. Information from the website of the College of Saint George says that the '*quire and its aisles were finished and roofed between 1477 and 1483*'.<sup>28</sup>

Maurice Bond's comprehensive study of the *Inventories of St. George's Chapel, Windsor Castle 1384-1667*, published in 1975, does not identify information about the installation date of the actual ceiling boss in the south aisle, and nor are there any contemporary sources relating specifically to this particular feature. Bond does point out that the aisle itself and its fan-vaulted ceiling were completed by 1485, so the perfectly reasonable assumption is that the boss was also in position by then, especially since both the king and bishop had died just a few years earlier. As it is only an 'assumption' it needs exploring further.

Work on the chapel continued well into the reigns of the Tudor dynasty, with Henry VII (1457-1509) being the first of that illustrious line, and he was crowned in 1485. The Tudors' ancestors were of Welsh origin, so the cross at Windsor may have had some particular, even personal significance to this dynasty, which terminated with the end of the reign of Elizabeth I (1533-1603). The red dragon of Wales was incorporated in the Tudors' heraldic representations, and the red dragon itself also appears in several ceiling bosses at Saint George's Chapel. An antiquarian source noted the successor to Beauchamp: '*The work was not completed till the reign of king Henry the VIII; the beautiful roof of the choir was put up in the year 1508. Sir Reginald Bray, prime minister to king Henry the Seventh, and one of the Knights Companions of the Order of the Garter, who died in 1502, succeeded bishop Beauchamp in the superintendence of this great work, and was a liberal contributor to the building of the choir, and other parts of the fabric; his cognizance [monogram] is frequently repeated on the roof of the choir*'.<sup>29</sup>

A further source would suggest around 1508 for the ceiling boss, assuming the south side aisle of the choir was roofed in stone vaulting around the time of the choir itself: '*By Indenture, dated June 5, in the one*



and twentieth year [1505-06] of this king's [Henry VII] reign, John Hylmer and William Vertue, Freemasons, undertook the vaulting of the Roof of the Choir (that curious and excellent piece of architecture) for seven hundred pounds, and to finish it by Christmas, anno Dom. 1508'.<sup>30</sup> A copy of the original indenture is among the Ashmolean Manuscripts bequeathed to the University of Oxford, and it requires the masons to provide heraldic ornamentations in the ceiling, plus 'any other device that shall please the king's grace to have in them'. Tudor King Henry VII would certainly have been familiar with the *Welsh Cross* in the Windsor chapel at the time, and he is likely to have known of its origin from Wales.

Although the nave was started in 1483 and was roofed by 1496, the exquisite stone vaulting was not finally finished until 1528, so the boss depicting the *Welsh Cross* with the Latin inscription appears to be rather later than the south choir aisle boss, surrounded as it is by an assortment of conflicting opinions as to its date. And, of course, the date of its making may differ from that of its installation in the completed vaulted roof, so the boss could have been devised and made before the king and Bishop Beauchamp died, but then installed later on during the lengthy and extensive building programme.

Of particular curiosity is the *Inventory of the Treasures of the Chapel at Windsor* from 1501: 'first of all a cross of gold containing in it part of the precious wood, adorned with many precious stones, without a foot'. One can only wonder what may have happened to the foot, or base, of the *Welsh Cross* around this point in time. Could this be linked to why the two ceiling bosses in the chapel portray the relic with a different base? We do know from the chapel's inventory of 1534 that the cross had re-acquired a foot, the boss above the nave showing how it may have looked around that time. But why did the foot go missing? Could the original (from 1351-2 or later alterations) have gone in for more repairs, following the theft of some of its jewels, or some other damage? Perhaps the whole foot was stolen some time in the early 1500s, and then a new one was made and fitted. Given the previously mentioned charges for repairing '*crucis vocati Neyth*', we can see that the *Welsh Cross* suffered while in England's custody. The damage to its pinnacles alone was considerable.

The relic had, however, continued to earn its keep at Windsor, as we find on turning again to the royal records. In March 1502 a priest had been provided with funds to enable Henry VII's queen, Elizabeth of York to make offerings 'at Wyndesoure and to the Holy Crosse there' (*Privy Purse Expenses*), the amount being a fairly modest sum of 2s.6d. Again on the 5th of July 1502: 'to Robert Alyn for money by him delivered to the Queen for her offering at Windsor. First to the Holy Cross'. The following month she made oblations to 'the Rood at Northampton' and in November, 'to Saint Edward and the relics at Westminster'.<sup>31</sup> She died just months later in February 1503.

King Henry's own *Privy Purse Expenses* reveal that he too was in the market for acquiring relics, as shown in an entry for the 8th of January 1499: 'To Olyver Tonor for reliques, in rewarde, £2.13s.4d.', although unfortunately these accounts do not record what the items were. One relic that he must have been particularly pleased to acquire was, it is claimed, part of Saint George's skeleton. The French statesman and Cardinal of Amboise delivered it to the king in 1504, a gift from King Louis XII of France. It comprised part of the leg and foot that had obviously been subject to the work of silversmiths, since it was 'goodly garnished in silver, like a knight's leg armed with a gilt spur'<sup>32</sup>, and it was carried in solemn procession to St. Paul's in London in April 1505. It was accompanied by Knights of the Garter as Saint George was the order's patron. The relic was bequeathed to Westminster Abbey under the Will of Henry VII, who had decorated its reliquary with his badge of a red rose and two portcullises.

Thus far in this journal of a pilgrimage we have looked at several, largely contemporary sources that tell us about pinnacles, roses, jewels and precious metals that went into the various transformations that tell the story of the *Welsh Cross*, and we have also considered its overall shape as a Celtic Cross. What we have not looked at in any detail is the relic of the True Cross itself (the Croes Naid), and in this and the next chapter we shall examine this piece of wood from what evidence is available. With only one exception, references in the chronicles, annals, state records and even papal documents of the Middle Ages all refer to the wooden object as being of a noteworthy large size.



The medieval chronicle of Nicholas Trivet is fairly typical in describing the relic as a '*great portion*', just as others say it was large, while the papal grant of 1354 goes so far as to describe it as being of '*great length*'. As a Dominican friar active in London at the time, it is quite possible that Trivet had seen the *Welsh Cross* in Westminster Abbey, or during its procession with Edward I. There is, however, one chronicle that is unique in dismissing the relic as '*small*' – the *Register and Chronicle of the Abbey of Aberconwy*, first published by the Camden Society in 1847. The relevant Latin text translates as '*a small piece called the Cros de Neth of the precious lord's cross of Wales*'. This otherwise inexplicable divergence from every other source could be interpreted as meaning that there was also a '*small piece*' of the larger relic itself, the '*lord's cross of Wales*'? In this context it should be borne in mind that when the relic was in Welsh hands that description, Croes Naid ('*Cros de Neth*') was simply in reference to the wood itself as the cross of salvation and the like, rather than to its reliquary container, depicted as a Celtic Cross in the ceilings at Windsor.

A possible explanation for this potentially misleading entry in the Aberconwy text may stem from the fact that the chronicle was not, in fact, compiled at Aberconwy Abbey, but rather at Hailes Abbey in Gloucestershire. This abbey was founded in 1246 by Richard, the first Earl of Cornwall and younger brother of Henry III, who conferred this title on him. It will be recalled from earlier in this book how the *Chronicle of Lanercost* mentions that the young Llywelyn ap Gruffydd went on crusade with Earl Richard, departing for the Holy Land in 1240. As we know that Llywelyn's brother Dafydd had a piece of the 'Holy Cross' when swearing an oath for the benefit of Henry III in 1241, could this have simply been a chip off the larger original relic, providing a more conveniently portable piece? Were the monkish compilers at Hailes Abbey simply confused? This was Earl Richard's foundation and he was entombed there when he died in 1272, a decade before Edward I acquired the *Welsh Cross*. Given that many other crusaders returned with bits of the True Cross, perhaps Richard also picked up a piece during his military excursion, and this led to a misunderstanding by English monks when compiling the chronicle at Hailes Abbey.

When examining this manuscript from Hailes, and particularly the part relating to Aberconwy, modern studies make some important observations, especially in a paper published in 2013. The author describes the so-called chronicle of Aberconwy as '*simply a gathering of fragments*'<sup>33</sup> of material sourced from elsewhere, and it was probably compiled in the late 15th-century. So, it was something of a mixed bag and the monks who produced this assemblage in the confines of Hailes Abbey were describing Edward I's acquisition of the relic some two hundred years after the event of the 1280s. They may even have been confusing memories of a '*small piece*' that the crusading Llywelyn had taken with him to the Holy Land as a personal protective talisman. Perhaps on his return Earl Richard had mentioned it to the abbot at Hailes, this snippet of information being then woven into the chronicle in later years. It remains something of a mystery in itself.

No details have surfaced telling us about the actual fragment at Windsor and how it was fitted into the *Welsh Cross*, so here again we can only speculate on its construction. There is the possibility that the Holy Wood lay behind the lozenge shape, shown vertically positioned in the shaft of the cross in the boss above the nave. Early relics of the True Cross encased in decorative artefacts often had a piece of transparent rock crystal revealing the fragment beneath, this being enclosed within a piece of jewellery, or a larger sacred object like a monstrance for use in church. When the Anglo-Saxon King Aethelstan received just such a relic in the year 948, it was described as '*a piece of our Lord's cross, most fittingly enclosed in crystal*'<sup>34</sup> Another example of this usage of crystal is the 12th-century cross from Cong Abbey in Ireland, the artefact's inscription telling us that it was made for one of the high kings of that nation. In the photographs overleaf on page 205 we can see the crystal dome, beneath which the now missing fragment of the True Cross would have been positioned, magnified by the lens effect of the clear crystal. This magnification was often necessary because the fragments were so small.

However, there is no mention of rock crystal in the accounts for Richard de Grimsby's work on the *Welsh Cross*, and we also know that the fragment itself was definitely large. And, of course, we cannot know for certain if what is seen today on the nave's ceiling in the chapel at Windsor is how the *Welsh Cross* looked



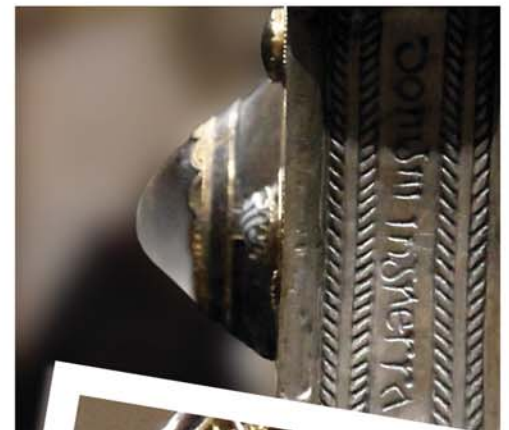
# The Cross of Cong

Named after Cong Abbey in County Mayo, this magnificent artefact was made in the first half of the 12th-century for one of the high kings of Ireland. Around the year 1122, the king received a piece of the True Cross from Rome, and this small relic was placed behind the rock crystal dome seen in the centre of the cross. Made of metal, including gold and silver, it also contained precious and semi-precious stones, most of which are now missing.

COLLECTION National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.



The lower end of the cross was designed to be fitted onto a pole or staff, which was then carried in processions during religious ceremonies in Ireland. When not in use for this purpose, the object was probably fitted to a base located on the abbey's altar. The back of the central section (far right) shows where a plate has been removed to take out the relic of the True Cross.







These photographs of the Tully Lough Cross of the 8th/9th-century illustrate how metal plates were pinned to the sub-structure to provide the decorative appearance. The *Welsh Cross* was plated with gold rather than bronze embossed plates.

COLLECTION  
National Museum of  
Ireland, Dublin.  
PHOTOGRAPHS  
Keith Bruce



when it left Richard of Grimsby's workshop in the mid 1300s. It could have gone in for several make-overs during the interim two hundred years or so, before the Windsor chapel ceiling bosses were made. Design taste and fashion could be just as fickle in the Middle Ages as they are today, though not quite as rapid to change, perhaps.

There is, however, a potentially informative reference from a declaration pertaining to the treasures at the chapel of Windsor, dating from 1548 in the reign of Edward VI. The document refers to a now detached piece of metal: *'the back of the holy Crosse, being of plate of golde'*. This would suggest that it may have been a detachable panel, which, when removed from the back of the cross, revealed the relic within. The inventory of 1534 refers to *'the holy crosse closyd in golde'*, and another Irish cross – illustrated above – shows in close-up how these decorative metal plates were pinned into position on to a usually wooden sub-structure. Since the *Chronicle of Lanercost* says it was a *'most beautiful piece of the Holy Cross, carved into a portable cross'*, and we know that the *Welsh Cross* relic was a large piece of the True Cross, it is conceivable that the sub-structure in this case was actually the relic itself, forming both the vertical and transverse elements.

Published in 1672, *The Institution, Laws and Ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter* contains a description of a ceremonial event from 1421, in the reign of Henry V. It describes how the king was met at the gate of Windsor Castle by the Dean and Canons, having a *'handsome Cross carried before them'*, and the king, *'taking the Cross to kiss'* from the Dean, proceeds into the chapel and approaches the high altar. Although it could be open to different interpretations, where this account says, *'and then kissing the venerable part of the Cross of our Lord'* could imply that the wood relic within the *Welsh Cross* was accessible for this purpose, it being the *'venerable part'*. So it is possible that the artefact had one of its gold plates at the back hinged to facilitate direct physical contact with the relic itself. For example, it will be recalled from chapter two of this book how Pope Sergius I, *'having unfolded coverings studded with gems of remarkable size, perceived that there was inserted in the crucifix a portion of the wood of the life-giving cross of Christ'*. This accessibility design feature would in no way be unusual for True Cross reliquaries of one form or another, including the *Welsh Cross*.

Until such time as information emerges to the contrary, we can reasonably assume that the *Welsh Cross* was of a Celtic Cross design when it disappeared over Offa's Dyke in the 13th-century, and eventually ended up in Windsor. The likelihood of new information from Wales is somewhat remote. We need only turn to the 1840s to learn just how remote that possibility is for us today. Parliament's concern at that time for the fate surrounding ancient documents prompted a special commission to be set up to examine the state of public records. The commissioners' investigations in Caernarfon make for depressing reading: *'I have discovered,*





### The Welsh Cross at Canterbury?

This watercolour depicts Edward IV and his queen, Elizabeth Woodville, the images being based on the fragmentary remains of the windows at Canterbury Cathedral, after being severely damaged in a fit of puritanical vandalism in 1643.

These pictures appear in Jacob Schnebbelie's book, *The Antiquaries Museum*, published in 1791. The author was draughtsman to London's Society of Antiquaries, and he wrote how that through the destruction that swept across the land during the Reformation, the window between the figures that portrayed a cross was trashed beyond repair.

When he died in 1483 Edward was entombed in his beloved Saint George's Chapel, where the ceiling boss depicting this king and Bishop Beauchamp adoring the *Welsh Cross* is reminiscent of these Canterbury windows, before their near complete destruction.

Later restoration of the windows is shown in the photograph, the central window being a newly devised replacement, as it appears today without the cross. Could it have been the king's treasure at Windsor?



FROM A.H. Thompson's *Cathedral Churches of England*, 1925.



by diligent inquiry, that a great quantity of ancient records had been deposited in a kind of cellar in the basement of the building, and suffered to go to decay; which were cleared out by order of the magistrates about twenty or thirty years ago, and partly sold together with old Acts of Parliament and other waste paper, by the hundred weight, and partly thrown upon dungheaps and wheeled into the Menai Strait, as rotten and worthless. Some of those records were bought or otherwise obtained by Mr. David Williams, of Turkey Shore, Caernarvon; who for many years past has supplied tailors and others with parchment, for various purposes, out of the materials; but, when at my request the clerk of the peace applied to him, only two plea rolls remained, which he took into his custody'.<sup>35</sup>

When it was not the tailors of Caernarfon busily making clothing patterns from these ancient parchment rolls, the places where they were kept was certainly destroying them, as the commissioner went on to note: 'the room is so damp, from the sea, that the floor is perishing'. The writer of this 1840 report to Parliament then points out the calamitous nature of the loss to historians of these precious records: 'they have been so little used by even the most critical of our historians, – I may say scarcely used at all; for I have found many which must have been unknown to Dugdale [17th-century antiquary], who had used the records in almost every other department; and they were wholly unused by Dodsworth [another antiquary, born 1585] and the antiquaries whose record collections fell into his hands'. This loss of these important records was not confined to Caernarfon. London also seems to have been an unsafe location for many documents that would have been of great interest to antiquaries studying Welsh history: 'The Treasury [of Receipts at Westminster] also contained other various quires and rolls in the Welsh Language, all of which have been long since lost'.<sup>36</sup>

Fortunately, other records survived elsewhere and, as revealed in the next chapter, it was at Windsor that the *Welsh Cross* met with a similar fate to the princely brothers of Gwynedd, who were stripped of their dignity – and their heads – by the king who took the relic from Wales. The story continues to be one of religious upheavals and personal survival, and each were to combine towards the eventual demise of the treasured relic of Saint Elen. Our pilgrimage becomes one of travelling through some challenging terrain in a treacherous landscape, filled with intrigue, deceit and even theft from the Tower of London.

## Garter Graphics

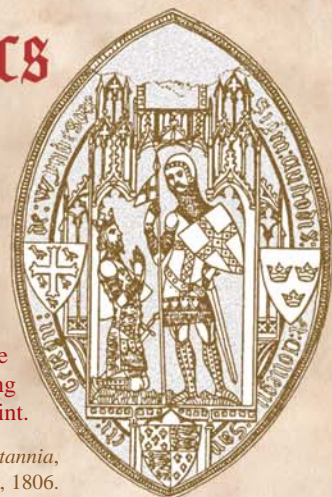


A 14th-century Garter Knight insignia depicts the individual kneeling in prayer before God and the figure of the crucified Jesus.

FROM *Archaeologia*,  
volume XXXI, 1846.

The seal of the College of the Chapel of Saint George at Windsor, showing the king kneeling before the saint.

FROM Lysons' *Magna Britannia*,  
volume I, 1806.





# *Dissolution of the Monasteries*







nvestigating the known visual records of the *Welsh Cross* in the last chapter, we found only two from its entire history: the ceiling bosses in the Chapel of Saint George at Windsor Castle. There was, however, a third appearance there, or at least that was what Winifred Coombe Tennant believed when she undertook her seminal research into the Welsh relic in the 1940s. The product of her otherwise thorough investigation was originally published in the report of the Society of the Friends of St. George's Chapel in 1943. A marginally wider readership was subsequently reached when her expanded paper on the *Welsh Cross* was published in 1951 in the journal of the National Library of Wales. In both of the articles a photograph is reproduced of a carved angel, holding what is described as a Celtic Cross, and it was presumed to have been the *Welsh Cross*. It appears in a large group of angel carvings surrounding the chapel's east window, although the photograph reproduced in the two articles is not of a good quality, presumably due to the fact that the angel is high up from the floor where the photographer stood.

Closer inspection of this angel (right) shows that far from the figure holding a Celtic Cross, it actually holds an imaginary musical instrument. The body of this instrument comprises a quatrefoil shape, a very popular gothic motif, positioned on a rectangular item, suggesting the box-form used for sound amplification. What would be the instrument's neck has incised upon it several lines to represent strings, and the angel's right hand suggests a plucking motion. Not only is it not the *Welsh Cross*, the angel carving in question is not even from the medieval period, unlike the ones in the upper, curved parts of the window's frieze of angels. Window design changes and restoration work in the 18th and 19th centuries led to this 'musical' angel appearing here, its present appearance being the work of the architect George Gilbert Scott in the late 1860s. Having laid that 20th-century myth to rest, we can return to the 15th-century and our pilgrimage.

When Henry VII ascended the throne of England in October 1485, he did so as a descendent on his mother's side of the Welsh Prince Rhys ap Tewdwr (died 1093), who ruled the kingdom of Deheubarth when the newly-arrived Normans were fighting their way into South Wales and establishing the Marcher Lordships. His paternal grandfather was Owen Tudor (anglicised spelling), whose family originated in Anglesey. By then the Welsh had become second-class citizens, even in Wales itself. As an example of this, there is an entry under the year 1401 (in the reign of Henry IV) in the *Chronicle of Adam of Usk*. It provides a contemporary, first-hand observation on a session of the English Parliament: '*I heard debated very many harsh things to be put in force against the Welsh, to wit: that they should not marry with the English, nor get them wealth nor dwell in England, and many other grievous things*'.<sup>1</sup> The uprising led by Owain Glyndwr exacerbated the existing socio-cultural demonization of the Welsh, resulting in entrenched negative attitudes that became all pervasive

## ANGELIC MUSIC

Writing in the 20th-century, a researcher on the *Welsh Cross* misidentified this angel, near a window in the Chapel of Saint George at Windsor, as holding the relic from Wales.





even into present times. As recently as the early 20th-century, children in schools in Wales were discouraged from speaking Welsh – instead of English – with teachers using humiliating practices to dissuade them.

Henry VII succeeded to the crown after defeating Richard III at the battle of Bosworth Field in August 1485, finally closing the chapter of history known as the Wars of the Roses. Consolidating his claim by marrying the daughter of Edward IV, master-mind behind the new Chapel of Saint George, Henry Tudor led the realm into a relative peace and stability it had not seen for many a year. The House of Lancaster and the House of York coalesced into an aristocratic unity, the old game of marriage alliances being played out once more. It is in the era of Henry VII (reign 1485-1509) that we find reference to a John Seymour, Windsor's Master of Works, the following quote being from Henry's *Privy Purse* expenses: '1499. Jan. Payde to S. M Shaa in full payment of all his rekenyngs to this day [...] making of diverse juels and setting and polishing of stones, as for money delivered by hym to Master Seymour for the werkes at Windesour, £667.2s.11d.'. <sup>2</sup> One cannot help but wonder if the decorative 'gold roses' that were added to the *Welsh Cross* stem from an emblematic addition from this era, when roses took on a deeply symbolic significance for the ruling houses.

This John Seymour was a friend of a John Ross (or Rous) from their student days together, and it was Ross who produced a rather derivative history of the kings of England, *Historia Regum Angliae*, in which this 15th-century writer makes a passing reference to the *Welsh Cross* as still being at Windsor in his day. He inevitably repeats the erroneous provenance connecting the artefact with Saint Neot, as perpetrated by 12th-century Anglo-Norman chroniclers. Seymour was keen to study the manuscript of this history, so as to obtain inspiration for new statues to fill empty niches in Saint George's Chapel. Ross was a cleric and a keen antiquary who spent most of his life in Warwick, enjoying a degree of patronage from the Earl of Warwick, whose family name was Beauchamp.

The *Welsh Cross* remained in Windsor, at least for now, while Henry VII was busy dealing with another cross relic: 'the rich Flower de Lys, which Maximilian I [Holy Roman Emperor from 1486 to 1519] had pawn'd to Henry VII for 50000 crowns. This was a jewel in form of a Flower de lys, wherein [...] was a piece of wood, pretended to be that of our Saviour's Cross'. Again we find royal treasures being pawned by Europe's nobility to raise funds. The writer's use of the word 'pretended' is a reflection of his post-Reformation mindset when he was writing in the 1720s, rather than implying that the relic was known to be fraudulent in the Middle Ages. This precious relic, also referred to as the 'Rich Lily', did eventually find its way back to France, and it was clearly a fabulous item: 'The inventory of the jewels contained in the rich Flower de Lys, weighing in the whole of gold and in precious stones, 211 ounces and half'.<sup>3</sup>

In April 1503 Pope Alexander VI issued a Bull granting indulgences and privileges in connection with Saint George's Chapel and its relics, including the 'Crosse Neyth to be kept there'. Still within the archives of the Dean and Canons at Windsor, this document acknowledges the chapel's holy relics and instructs the Dean to engage the services of 'sufficient confessors', members of the clergy to be in attendance at the chapel. The requirement was that they should be there three days before specified feast days of saints, ensuring that the anticipated crowds of worshippers and pilgrims were serviced with absolution and the like. Just as in Edward IV's time, donations in return for 'spiritual cleansing' were part of the arrangement, and Edward's Bishop Beauchamp even recorded a permanent message for these devout folk in an inscription beneath the ceiling boss depicting the pair adoring the *Welsh Cross*.

The location of the inscribed stonework and recessed shelf is shown on the plan of Saint George's Chapel on page 201, together with a photograph of this site. It remains in the recess in the north side of the south choir aisle, where a religious book was placed for the purpose of devotion. The inscription – in the quaint language of the day – reads as follows: 'Who leyde thys booke here? Reuerend ffader in God, Richard Beauchamp, bisschop, of this Dyocese of Salisbury. And Wherfor? to thys entent, that Preestis and Ministers of Goddis Churche may here have the occupacion theretof, seyying therein theyr divyne servyse, and for all othir that lysten to sey thereby theyr devocyon. Asketh he eny equalle mede? yee, as mouche as our Lord lyst to reward hym for his good intent; praying euery man wos duty or devocyon is eased by thys booke, they woll



say for hym this comune oryson, Due Jhu Xye knelying in the presence of thys holy Crosse, for the whyche the Reuerend ffader in God aboveseyed hath graunted to the tresure of the Churche to eny man xl dayys of pardun'.<sup>4</sup>

On offer to the devout were forty days of pardon. In other words, a period that could be knocked-off the time the deceased's soul would spend in Purgatory. This piece of pure invention from the Middle Ages was intended to instill in people's minds the fear of a 'waiting room' in which the soul would hang around before God's final decision on its destiny. With the aid of the prayers of the living, the soul could then move on to Heaven, or not as the case may be. In an effort to avoid the anxiety of time spent in Purgatory, people would make every effort to reduce their stay there. Purgatory does not appear in the Gospels and, needless to say, it evolved into another profitable scam devised by those in charge of medieval Christianity.

Beauchamp's reference to '*the presence of this holy Crosse*' makes it perfectly clear that the *Welsh Cross* – '*the tresure of the Churche*' – was positioned in close proximity to the inscription, and the ceiling boss appears overhead at the centre of the fan-vaulting in this location. References to oblations to the relic describe there as being a 'chapel' (*Capelle de Crois Neit*), although nowadays that end of the south aisle is an area one can walk through, rather than being a self-contained, or otherwise enclosed space that could constitute a chapel as such. Centuries ago there may well have been some non-structural screening in this area, so as to define the space into which a person would enter the *Capelle de Crois Neit*. As to where the *Welsh Cross* itself stood the records are silent, although one possibility is the high, elaborately-arched recess where Beauchamp's book lay on a shelf some 15ins/40cm deep, as seen below in the illustration on the left and also

## Bishop Beauchamp at Saint George's Chapel

Bishop Beauchamp's inscription states that those seeking a pardon are required to kneel before the Holy Cross. Along with the book laid on the shelf, could the *Welsh Cross* have also stood here?

Detailed photographs of either side of the shelf show where something of value was secured to the masonry to protect it from theft.



The Bishop of Salisbury, Richard Beauchamp was appointed the first Chancellor of the Order of the Garter in 1475 and became Dean in 1478. As well as the ceiling boss in the south choir aisle, his presence is also recorded in this same area of the chapel.



On the opposite side of the aisle is Bishop Beauchamp's monument in the chapel. His final resting place and tomb is in Salisbury Cathedral.

*Could this have been the 'Capelle de Crois Neit' referred to in the records?*



in the photograph on page 201. While the actual dimensions of the *Welsh Cross* are not recorded, there would probably have been ample space to accommodate it, forming an impressive shrine with the bishop's book in front of the base of the cross and his inscription beneath.

Another possible location is one that Sir William St John Hope (1854-1919) touched on in his two-volume study, *Windsor Castle – An Architectural History*, published at the beginning of the 20th-century. He refers to the recess directly opposite the Beauchamp inscription, just across the south aisle, shown on the right in the illustration overleaf on page 212. The author describes it as being '*a square-headed opening [25ins/60cm deep] filled with the traceried wooden panel [and] the plinth within on each side is a blocked-up hole for a fastening or metal plug of some kind*'. He goes on to say that there are remains of '*two other iron stumps on the bottom of the recess. What purpose these fastenings served is not now apparent*'.<sup>5</sup> The implications are that something once stood on the plinth in this recess that required fastening in position for security. He also notes that beneath the recess are carved quatrefoil panels, the largest of which contained the arms of Beauchamp, Bishop of Salisbury, with a mitre carved above. As the Windsor chapel's '*chief treasure*', the *Welsh Cross* would certainly have demanded tight security, so perhaps this was the location of its final resting place, after it left the reredos of the high altar, becoming the *Capelle de Crois Neit* where the visitors prayed and made their oblations. Which of the two recesses either side of the aisle contained the *Welsh Cross* remains unknown.

Situated close at hand is an iron money box (pictured right) for devotional offerings, the object requiring four separate keys, each lodged with different people for access to the donations. These money offerings tended to increase in the months of April and May, particularly following the feast of Saint George when the Garter Knights assembled at Windsor for their annual festivities. Also, May was the month when Saint Helen's discovery of the True Cross was celebrated. It appears that some pilgrims were less than honest when placing their offerings in the box, the accounts from 1415 and 1416 recording that some fake coins were found. This money box was regularly observed by its appointed custodian, who was concealed upstairs with a convenient view through a spy-hole in the masonry, although spotting bad currency would have been difficult. The box itself dates from around 1480, the time of Edward and Beauchamp, and the offerings included '*the grete oblacions to oure Lady, the holli cross and the blessed Kyng Henry*'.

The 1400s came to a close and a new century began that was to have a drastic impact on the *Welsh Cross* and also the Welsh people, who had already suffered much discrimination at the hands of England's legislature. In 1509 we enter the reign of Henry Tudor's son, the indomitable Henry VIII. For Wales itself this Henry's reign produced something bordering on cultural annihilation through statutory means. The *Act of Incorporation* of 1536 – more innocuously known as the *Act of Union* – was to set in stone the might-is-right status of earlier centuries, when Edward I returned from Wales triumphant. The legislation demanded that all proceedings in courts, for example, would be conducted in English; more often than not the accused could only speak Welsh. Adam of Usk's observations, quoted earlier, are depressingly echoed in this new law: '*henceforth no person or persons that use Welsh speech or language shall have or enjoy any manner of office or fees within this realm of England, Wales or other of the king's dominions upon pain of forfeiting the same offices or fees*'. It was quite simply statutory discrimination against particular British subjects.

The Welsh were to be subjected to being anglicised, but then so too was the expression of religion

### The Price of Purgatory

This ornate iron Alms Box was made in 1480 for Saint George's Chapel. Those visiting the *Welsh Cross* and other shrines and tombs would be expected to insert a coin or two, all under the watchful eye of its custodian concealed upstairs. It took four separate keys to open the box. Nearby is the recess with Beauchamp's inscription, offering the faithful a break from Purgatory.





under Henry VIII. What took place during the 1500s curtailed centuries of papal influence, opening a flood-gate that accelerated the on-going Reformation. King Henry watched as the torrents destroyed the great abbeys, although he and his henchmen made sure the treasures were removed before utter ruin set in. The Tudor king's coffers bulged with bullion from the sale of goods and formerly monastic estates. His majesty's commissioners scoured the realm, intent on seizing whatever was of value, and the rich and previously influential Glastonbury Abbey was not to be spared, as was reported in 1536: '*We have found a fair chalice of gold, and divers other parcels of plate, which the abbot [Richard Whiting] had hid secretly from all such commissioners as have been there in times past*'.<sup>6</sup> Another report on Glastonbury's evasive action actually accused the abbot and monks of theft, saying they had '*stollyne as much plate and adornments as wolde have sufficide to have begone a new abbay*'.<sup>7</sup> The antiquarian William Stukeley later observed Glastonbury Abbey being demolished bit by bit: '*every week a pillar, a buttress, a window-jamb, or an angle of fine hewn stone, is sold to the best bidder*'.<sup>8</sup> Abbeys and priories eventually became convenient stone quarries, following what might better be termed the desolation of the monasteries, rather than the less evocative 'dissolution'.

In 1538 the Bishop of Salisbury, Nicholas Shaxton, was issuing injunctions against the use of relics throughout his diocese. He demanded that these items, including '*gobbetts of wood, under the name of parcels of the holy cross*',<sup>9</sup> should be brought to him for examination. A successor to this diocese, Bishop Gilbert Burnet continued the fight against the use of relics for devotional purposes, declaring that, '*they shall not shew no reliques, or feigned miracles, for increase of lucre [money], but that they exhort pilgrims and strangers to give that to the poor, that they thought to offer to their images or reliques*'.<sup>10</sup> The late Bishop Beauchamp would have been horrified by these developments, but such was the context in which we next encounter the *Welsh Cross*, now entering the final leg of its long journey through history.

It was in 1534 that attention was focused on the College of Saint George and the many precious items in the chapel. What started out as an attempt to destroy the so-called '*popish folly*' of worshipping at shrines and idolatrous attention to relics had turned into state-sponsored looting. The king's sequestration was supported by individuals described as '*visitors*', whose activities went under the seemingly innocent title of '*visitations*', following which reports were submitted to Henry VIII and his council. Kept in the National Archives in London, an inventory of Saint George's Chapel was made in 1534, and it describes the state of the *Welsh Cross* at that time: '*Item the holy crosse cloyd in golde garnyshed with rubyes, saffers, hemerods. lackyng off the same stones yn number XV [15] as yt aperythe in the place where they wer sett. The fote off this crosse is all golde costyd (ribbed) standing apon lyons garnyshed full with parlle and stone lackyng in the same fote XXIX [29] stones and perlls as it aperythe yn the place where they stode the which holy crosse was at the pryorye off Northeyn Walys and Kyng Edward the thyrde owre fyrst fowndar gave the lyvelodde [livelihood] to have this holy crosse to Wyndesor the fote of this cross wayse CCC.LXIX [369] unces and a halfe*'.<sup>11</sup>

Firstly, the reference to the '*pryorye*' is possibly to Aberconwy Abbey, the place where it appears to have been presented to Edward I, and which he then demolished so as to build his fortified town of Conwy, or it may even be referring to Cymmer Abbey. Neither were priories as such and if, as is likely, the writer specifically meant a priory, then maybe the *Welsh Cross* had been kept at the one in Penmon in Anglesey. Secondly, and especially striking, is the description of the base or '*fote*' as now incorporating ornamental lions in its design, a feature that may have been inspired by the relic shrine of Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. As shown on page 107, the French shrine is supported by ornamental lions at each corner. When the lions were included in the base of the *Welsh Cross* does not appear to be recorded. They are not specifically mentioned in the record of Richard de Grimsby's work for Edward III, although the only specified design feature in that record is the eagle, the whole of that document being concerned with values, costs and precious materials used, rather than the artefact's actual appearance. So the lions could have been the work of Edward's goldsmith in 1351-52/3, or a later addition during an as yet unknown refashioning of the base. There is, however, an inventory taken at Windsor in 1547-48 that shows the base had a total of seven gold lions: '*Item the fote of the crose set about with vij [7] lyons of golde and garnysed with [precious] stone and perill [pearl]*'.<sup>12</sup>



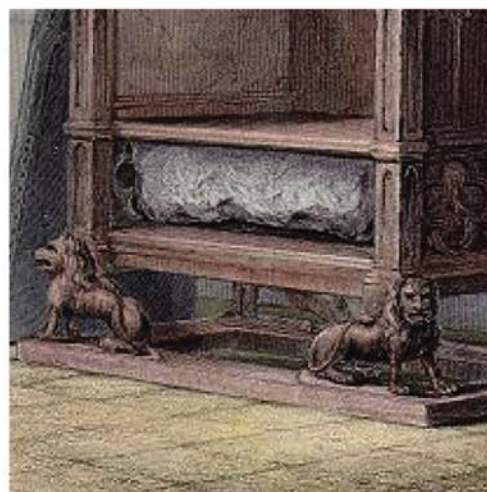
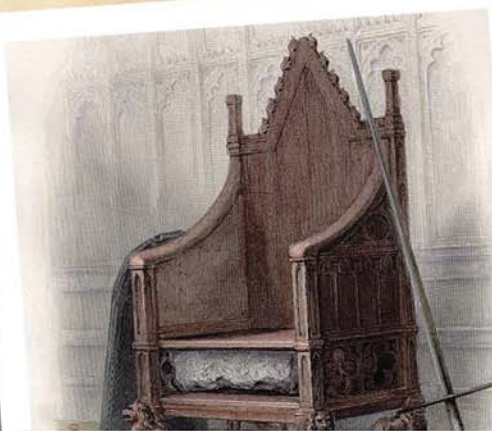
In the early 1500s four lions were added to replace the legs on the Coronation Chair in Westminster Abbey; they were renewed in 1727. As a design feature they were in no way unusual, the lion being a popular symbol among the nobility. The chapel at Windsor also had relics of Mary Magdalene, the reliquary itself comprising two angels standing upon a round base with gilded lions. Beauchamp's cathedral church in Salisbury also had a *'double cross flory of gold and silver. It stands upon four lions, and has part of our Saviour's cross, with plates of gold, and many stones of diverse colours and pearls'*.<sup>13</sup> An inventory from the closing years of the reign of Henry VI lists a silver reliquary *'standing upon two lions'*. Like many other reliquaries, they were soon to fall victim to far more than changing tastes in design of church goods.

The Windsor inventory from 1534 states that the *'fote of this cross'* weighed nearly three-hundred and seventy ounces, presumably including the lions. What the actual cross weighed without its base is not recorded here. From the sheer weight of the base, we may infer that this was necessitated by the need for stability, since the cross itself was presumably of a substantial height and weight. As we have seen, the *Welsh Cross* was *relatively* intact at the beginning of the 1530s, apart from some missing gems.

The reforming zeal of Henry VIII continued at a pace, with his prime-mover, Thomas Cromwell (c.1485-1540) playing the lead role in implementing the wishes and needs of his king, including his majesty's difficult divorce proceedings. Reports by letter from Cromwell's agents are filled with accounts of the mischief and devious activities in the ecclesiastical institutions now facing dissolution. Although inventories of treasured possessions were required to be drawn up, 'omissions' were not uncommon, as at Christ Church in Canterbury, where *'certayne parcells of sylver, golde, and [gem] stone to the value of thowsandys of poundys, as the brethren of the same house reporte, willffullye lefte owte of the said inventorye'*.

Abbots and monks in Wales were also making moves to stash relics and other treasures before Cromwell's agents arrived. Such was the case at Cymmer Abbey, where a fine 13th-century chalice and paten (Eucharist plate) were hidden around 1537, during the Dissolution of the Monasteries. They were discovered in 1898 and are now in the Royal Collection and on display at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, as illustrated opposite on page 216. An agent named Meneven wrote to Cromwell following a visit to Bangor: *'The holyest relyke in all Northe Walys I sende to yow here; ther may no man kysse that but he muste knele so sone as he se yt, though it war in the fowleest place in all the contre'*. Meneven goes on to say how the devout were obliged to give money or food-stuffs as offerings, after kissing the object, which along with *'another image, the whyche I also have closeyd up'*, was worth twenty marks a year to the monks. The writer

## The Coronation Chair



As well as showing the lions added to Edward I's famous chair or throne, this illustration shows the Stone of Scone that this king seized from Scotland during his efforts to conquer that nation.

ILLUSTRATION S. Wilmot, *The Queens of England*, 1889.





A window in St. John's Church in Chester depicts the day the king's 'visitors' arrived to seize the treasures that had accumulated over the centuries. Pictured below is the chalice and paten that were buried by monks at Cymmer Abbey, rather than let these cherished possessions fall into the hands of the Tudor monarchs.



continues, telling Cromwell that he would have sent him all the relics but for the fact that they were all too cumbersome to carry, even apologising for not listing everything because it 'wold take a schete of paper'.

Nevertheless, items that were not consigned to the flames on the spot were shipped back to London for public edification, an effort to demonstrate to the populace what frauds had taken place in the name of the 'old religion', as Roman Catholicism was now described. An 18th-century antiquary visiting a Welsh village reflected on an event from the 1530s: *'The church and village of Llan Dderfel: the first was dedicated to St. Derfel Gadarn, and was remarkable for a vast wooden image of the saint, the subject of much superstition in antient times [...] it was brought to London in the year 1538, and was used as part of the fuel which consumed poor friar Forest to ashes, in Smithfield, for denying the king's supremacy'*.<sup>14</sup>

A summary of the findings of visitations in parts of England, known as the *Compendium Compertorum*, catalogues these 'vain and fictitious relics', which included ten fragments of the True Cross and seven specimens of the 'Virgin's Milk', subsequently identified as being largely composed of chalk. King Edward I had himself been duped by this particular scam, since the inventory taken of his relics in 1307 records 'a small ampulla containing milk of the Virgin'. Saint George's chapel at Windsor is also said to have had a statue of the Virgin Mary containing a few drops of her milk. Much exposing of these so-called relics continued unabated. Even the 'blood of Christ' turned out to be yet another monastic fraud: *'it was perceived to be only honey clarified and coloured with saffron, as was shewed at Paul's cross by the Bishop of Rochester, 24th February, 1538'*.<sup>15</sup>

Such were the activities of unscrupulous monks, and the king and his ministers were having none of it. Reports from his agents continued to pour into Cromwell's chambers: *'Pleaseth it your Worship to understand that yesternight we came from Glassonbury [Glastonbury] to Bristow [Bristol], I here send you for relicks two flowers wrapped up in black scarcenet, that on Christmas even will spring and burgen and bear flowers. Ye shall alsoe receive a bag of relicks, wherein ye shall see strange things; as God's coat, our Lady's smock, part of God's supper [...] I send you also Marie Magdalen's girdell'*.<sup>16</sup> And so it goes on. Relics and unyielding catholic priests were consigned to the flames.



The son of Henry VIII and Jane Seymour, Edward VI (1537-1553) was only nine years-old when he was crowned in 1547, and his was to be a short-lived reign as he died aged only fifteen. The break with Rome made by his father continued undaunted through Edward's brief period on the throne, spear-headed by Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), the archbishop of Canterbury. Latin and the various practices of Roman Catholicism were superseded by services and prayer books in English, and the worship of relics was viewed with particularly virulent contempt, but, of course, not by everyone. Roman Catholics continued to practice their brand of Christianity, risking everything for their beliefs and secrecy became a necessity.

A contemporary account of the religious upheaval tearing at the heart and soul of Tudor England can be found in the *Chronicle* of Charles Wriothesley (1508-1562), the following quote illustrating the potential fate awaiting a relic like the *Welsh Cross*: *'This year [1547], in August, the Kinges Majestie, wit the advise of my Lord Protector [Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset] and other of his Counsell, sent out throughe this realme of Englande certaine godlie injunctions for the reformation of the clergie, the true preaching and setting fourth of Godes worde, and utter abolishing of idolatrie, which were clene putt downe in everie parish church of this realme'.*

The chronicle continues with an eye-witness description of events at Saint Paul's, the medieval building (pictured right) that was eventually replaced by the present cathedral after the Great Fire of London in 1666: *'visitors beganne that night to take downe the roode [crucifix] with all the images in Poules Church, which were clene taken awaie, and by negligence of the laborers certaine persons were hurt and one slaine in the falling downe of the great crosse in the rode loft, which the papish priestes said was the will of God for the palling downe of the said idolls. Likewise all images in everie parish church in London were pulled downe and broken by the commandment of the said visitors'.*<sup>17</sup>

Among the items destroyed was an image of Jesus rising from the tomb, the figure being fully animated by articulated joints. No doubt the devout were spiritually edified by these puppet shows, although it is hard for us today to appreciate such levels of credulity. There are many examples from the period of religious institutions engaging in such absurd practices, designed to impress and often deceive: *'The rood of grace, of Boxley, was shown to be an automaton, by Bishop Hilsey, at Paul's Cross; by means of cords it rolled its eyes, opened its mouth, and nodded its head approvingly, or in dissent'.*<sup>18</sup> Christian worship had been reduced to theatrical spectacles like these, and the reforming state was hell-bent on eliminating such *'devilish practices'*. The tragic treatment of many Catholics and their priests was a regular occurrence, as Wriothesley's chronicle frequently records throughout its pages: *'a priest was drawn from the Towre of London into Smythfield and their hanged, beheaded, and quartered, and his members and bowels brent [burnt], which was one of the causes of a commotion'.* Many priests and other Catholics were burnt at the stake in an effort to break with the past, and especially the historic influence of



*"In the Bodleian Library there is an inventory of these relics, amongst them part of the wood of the cross, a stone of the Holy Sepulchre, a stone from the spot of the Ascension, and some bones of the eleven thousand virgins of Cologne."*

As quoted above from William Benham's book, *Old St. Paul's Cathedral*, this popular place of worship (right) was richly endowed with relics, all now heading for destruction. So too were the people who clung on to the 'Old Religion'. Burning at the stake, as here at Windsor, victimised many.



ILLUSTRATION *Pictorial History of England*, volume II, 1839.



ILLUSTRATION Benham's *Old St. Paul's Cathedral*, 1902.

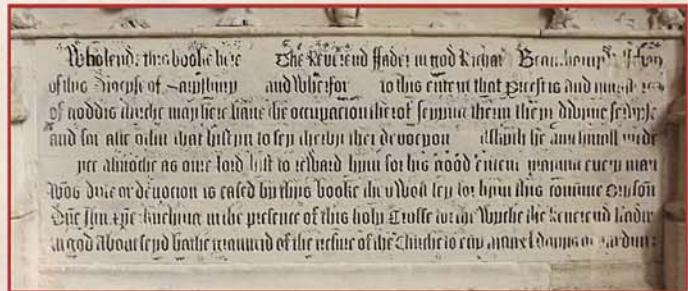


Rome. Failure to acknowledge the religious supremacy of the English monarch as ‘Defender of the (New) Faith’ could have only one outcome.

Just as his father had grown richer by seizing the possessions of ecclesiastical institutions, young King Edward VI and his Privy Council were keen to acquire what was left, especially since the Crown was now heavily in debt. Edward noted in his diary at the time: ‘*It was agreed that commissions should go out for to take certificate of the superfluous church-plate to mine use, and to see how it hath been imbesellid [embezzled]*’.<sup>19</sup> Due to its status as a royal chapel, possessions in the care of the College of Saint George had remained largely free of sequestration by the Crown, but events were soon to take a dramatic turn for the worse, when the commissioners started including colleges, free chapels and chantries in their surveys. A record in Rymer’s *Foedera* for the 8th of May 1549 refers to *Letters Patent* from King Edward, granting a commission to the Earl of Warwick and others to visit ‘*the king’s free chapel within the Castle of Windsor*’.

In 1550 a letter was sent to the Dean at Windsor, instructing him to ‘*deface altars*’ in accordance with the instructions of the king’s Privy Council.<sup>20</sup> Presumably, the massive alabaster reredos at the high altar also fell victim to this order, but there are no records of what became of this huge and costly structure. Another victim was ‘*the inscription under a Bible placed by Bishop Beauchamp in a niche in St. George’s Chapel at Windsor for public reading was eagerly defaced*’.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately the inscription’s text remains legible today.

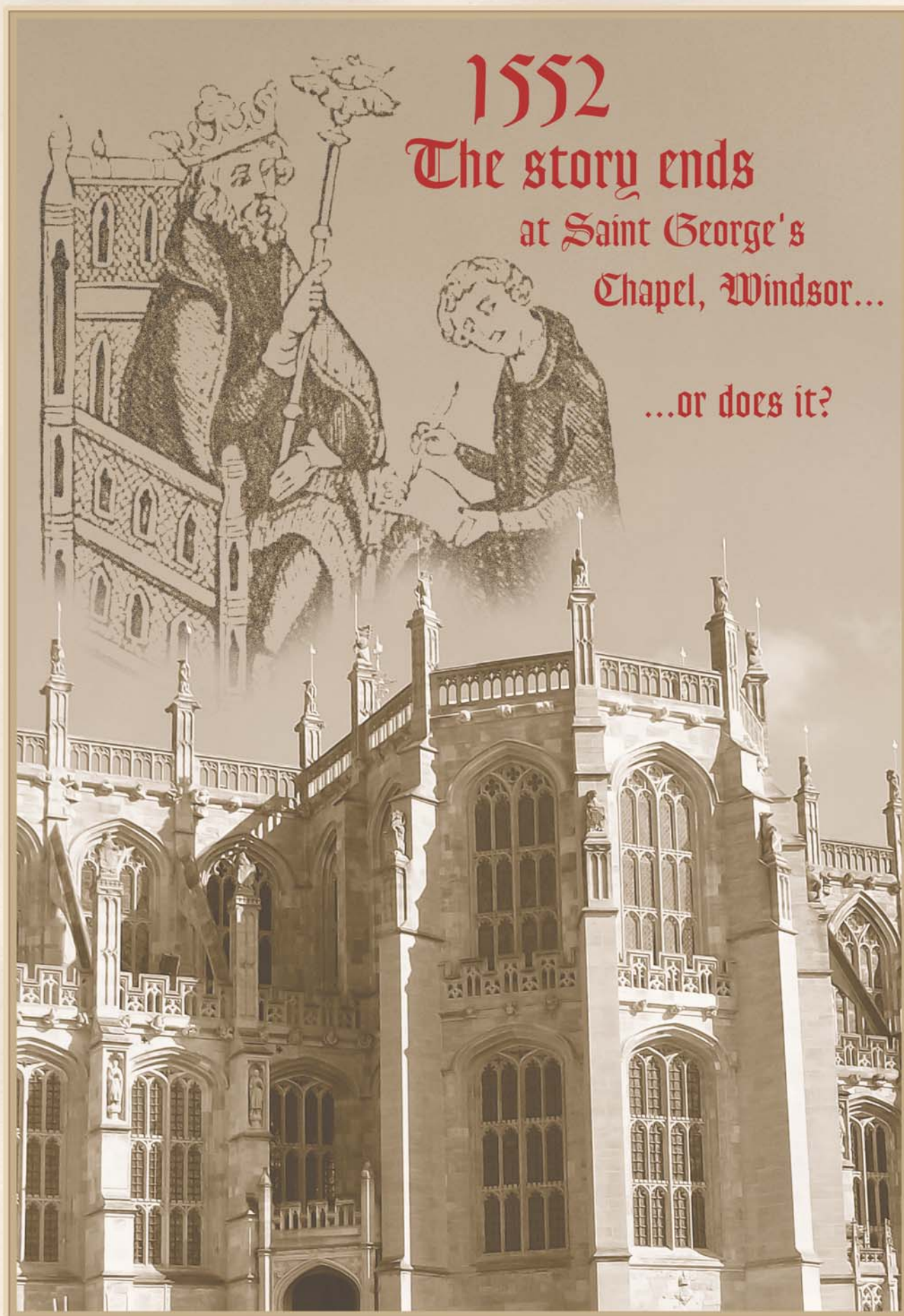
Like countless other clerics, the Dean and Canons of the College of Saint George knew only too well the fate that awaited ‘their’ treasured possessions, including the *Welsh Cross*, and much wheeling and dealing went on, as revealed in a paper published in 1869 in *Archaeologia*,<sup>22</sup> the journal of London’s Society of Antiquaries. Drawing on 16th-century state records, Reverend George Townsend drew together a tale of intrigue and obfuscation at Windsor, with the Dean and others making the work of the king’s visitors as challenging as possible.



By 1552 rumours had been widely circulating that the chapel’s custodians were engaged in asset stripping at a rapid rate, and when news of this reached the ears of members of the king’s Privy Council, a visitation was immediately ordered, under the auspices of William Parr, Marquis of Northampton and Great Chamberlain of England. The investigating team was led by Sir Philip Hoby, Provost of the Order of the Garter, implementing a Royal Commission issued in July of that year. The brief was to examine the college’s ‘*bookes of accomptes [accounts] and olde inventories of Jewells, of Plate, of Reliques*’ and the like, so as to determine what was behind the rumours. They arrived on Saturday the 16th of July, only to find that the Dean and several others were absent ‘*due to illness*’. The documents that needed to be examined ‘*cam not to our hands till the same Saturdaye verie late in the night*’, as Hoby bemoaned in a letter, going on to complain that ‘*they of the College have been very untoward to come to the confessing of the things missing*’.

On the 21st of July an inventory was examined in detail, but there was no sign of the *Welsh Cross* itself, merely ‘*item the foote of the Crosse*’. On further interrogation, the clergy explained that much had been sold to ‘*defray expenses*’ and a list of these costs was provided, largely consisting of amounts for building maintenance and repairs. It included charges for ‘*taking doune the Alters, leveling and paving of the ground, and for peinting of the East end where the high alter was, and where King Edward the fourth lieth*’. Other items were sold simply to provide necessities for living, as financial support from the Crown was not forthcoming, or at least on a regular basis as in the past. The college’s custodians explained that assorted items had been sold, but that the Dean and Chapter believed it was lawful for them to do so, ‘*knowinge none other owners of the said plate and gooddes*’. Evidently, they saw themselves as personal owners rather than custodians of the treasures in the king’s chapel, and no doubt his majesty and his Privy Council found this totally unacceptable. A particular point of concern is recorded in the *Annals of Windsor* (1858), and it is an





1552  
The story ends  
at Saint George's  
Chapel, Windsor...  
...or does it?



indicator of how desperate things had become, since it shows the stripping of funereal items: *'the plates of copper upon the graves'*.

The issue of who owned what is something of a moot point. For example, under Henry VII's Will (dated March 1509) the king specified that a great image of Saint George *'now in our Juell house'* should be bequeathed to Saint George's Chapel at Windsor. The gold object weighed two hundred and sixty ounces and was encrusted with costly gems, the moot point being who was actually receiving the bequest, since the king's Will reads: *'Also we give and bequeathe to Almighty God, Our Lady, his blessed Moder, and Sainte George within oure College of Windesore, and to the Dean and Chanons of the same College that now be and that hereafter shall be, for a perpetuall Memorie there to remaigne, while the World shall endure'*.<sup>23</sup> It would be somewhat disingenuous of the Dean and Chapter to claim that they knew of *'none other owners'* in their defence, although it is vaguely evident that this particular artefact no longer belonged to the Crown, even though it was in *'oure College of Windesore'*, according to the king's Will. Since the world continued to *'endure'* in 1552, the object should have remained there. The Dean was hardly likely to argue this nuanced point with young King Edward, the son of Henry VIII.

Hoby had written to Sir William Cecil (1520-1599), Secretary of State in August of 1552, saying their intention had been *'to get as much as they can of what hath byn embeselyd, or the valu thereof'*.<sup>24</sup> The investigations continued during the summer with this clear brief in mind. The Dean and Chapter of the college were obliged to provide details of all disposals and sales, but again no specific mention of the *Welsh Cross*, or at least as being intact. In 1547 alone they had made over £500 from selling *'certain plate gold and silver'*, and over the next couple of years sales included processional crosses, candlesticks, sensors, chalices and two small images of *'our Lady the one, and the other of St. George'*. London's goldsmiths were only too pleased to oblige the college during its asset stripping enterprise. The commissioners' certificate, dated the 21st of July 1552, shows that from March 1545 to July 1552 the value of disposed treasure was estimated as plate amounting to £1,965. 3s. and jewels £1,489. 8s.<sup>25</sup>

The collegiate individuals politely went into a defensive mode, stating in a letter to the commissioners that, *'for obedience sake, we wold have abstained from sale of such things until we had declared to the King's Majestie and his honorable Counsell the great urgent causes'*. They go on to plead that, *'our former doings may be taken in good parte'*, clearly fearing the king's wrath, and the Dean, William Franklin, was very keen to point out that he *'was never present at waing [weighing] or selling of anie of the plate or jewelles'*. Canon Owyne Oglethorp also shrugged off suspicion: *'I never knew what unces [weight] of plate was solde at anie time, nor for what value nor by whom'*. In a somewhat contradictory statement, Oglethorp confesses to receiving £25 as a share, adding that he lost most of the money, which *'he did imagine it to have been unjustly gotten'*.

Another deposition, this time from a Richard Tournier who had lived there for fifteen years, informs the commissioners that he *'hath heard it whispered emongst the ministers of the quier, that the Deane and the prebendaries had made vendition [sold] of divers thinges aforesaid, but he never knew to whom or by whom enie such sale was made'*. He also gives a distinctly vague account of various items: *'a pair of beades of golde (which beades I never saw), a chalice of gold (which chalice I never sawe), the holie crosse with a broade foote set with stones [the Welsh Cross], St. George's head and salet of golde. All theis thinges partlie have I seene, but surely much speach have I hearde of aboundaunce of thies things'*. How he managed to partly see something is rather puzzling and just saying he had heard of them hardly clarifies the issue. Tournier also reported that he had seen cushions in the homes of the Dean and others that had been made from copes, now no longer required to be worn during services in the chapel.

The plot thickens with the testimony of the Sexton, Francis Lakin, who said, *'sins the last visitation was a certein of plate sent awaye, but we cannot tell how much it was, for it was in a clothsack fast sealed up, but by estimacion an horselode. This clothsack was carried to London by the consent of all of them afore rehearsed, to what use we cannot tell'*. The document among the evidence the commissioners compiled that



tells us most is that for the year 1548, when in January a number of items of precious metal were taken to London and sold to the goldsmiths, Wigg and Dickson:

*'Item – the back of the holy crosse, being of plate of golde.'*

*'Item – a long peece of gold pertaineing to the garnishing of the holie crosse.'*

*'Item – 2 peeces of louse gold pertaineing to the garnishing of the holie crosse.'*

The list includes, among many other treasured objects, references to crosses large and small, but none incorporate the qualification of *'holie'* or *'holy'*, as with the items listed above. The prefixing with this word, when referring to artefacts containing a fragment of the True Cross, was common practice and is to be found in references of many types throughout history. From this list we may conclude that the *Welsh Cross* had been periodically stripped of its precious gold plates by those in charge of the chapel. And perhaps it was this that Tournier was referring to when he used the word *'partlie'* in his evidence; in other words, he had seen *parts* of the *Welsh Cross*. The first item refers to the back of the cross, so perhaps the front had already been sent off *'in a clothsack'* to London. Presumably, the precious stones in the *'holy crosse'* itself had long since been removed and sold, although, it transpires, not all of those from its base or foot. The previously mentioned pinnacles and gold roses are not itemised in these particular records, so we can safely assume they too went to the goldsmiths in London, years before the king's commissioners arrived in 1552.

These records do refer to *'the holie crosse with the foote all gold and stone [precious stones]'* being handled by the under treasurer, George Whithorne. A preceding statement by Francis Lakin makes mention of a *'cock of silver'* decorated with pearls not being listed in the commissioners' inventory of 1552, implying that it had been disposed of some eight years earlier. It would appear from all this that the demise of the *Welsh Cross* began around 1546, the evidence suggesting that it was already in something of a sorry state by January 1548, four years before the commissioners arrived at Saint George's Chapel.

Sir Philip Hoby's certificate, inventory and report of the findings at Windsor were submitted to the Privy Council, and in it he observed, *'that there is nowe but a smale porcion of things remayneing in the Colledge'* compared to what was recorded some seven years earlier. Writing about the general lack of co-operation from the Dean and others, Hoby's letter points out that they were not able *'to aunswer unto the thinges lacking so fully as it behoveth, they then before us submitted themselves most humbly to the King's Majestie'*. And well they might in these troubled times. However, we should not condemn out of hand those in charge at Windsor for what took place. They were simply trying to survive against often overwhelming odds, their income having been dramatically reduced through the reforming zeal of Tudor monarchs and the evolving Protestant Revolution. Even the ceremonies held by the Knights of the Garter were reformed in 1548, the central role of the *Welsh Cross* having been abandoned, with the ancient relic becoming redundant. Oblations were strictly proscribed, so that any offerings were to be placed *'in the box for the poor, without any other reverence or kissing of any paten or other thing'*.<sup>26</sup> Previously, offerings in the chapel were treated *'as money in hand to spend on what was necessary'*,<sup>27</sup> but this source of much-needed income had now dried up.

In the late 1540s a draconian Act was passed, ordering the *'putting away of diverse Bookes and Images'* on pain of fines for failing to do so. The mere possession of what were termed *'idolatrous objects'* carried a prison sentence for a third offence. Over the next hundred years this crescendo of ideological vandalism reached unprecedented heights. So much so, that by the time we get to the first of the Stuart monarch's legislation (3 *James I, Chapter 5, Section 26*) demands were being made that *'popish books and relicks of popery'*, including crucifixes, were to be *'defaced and burnt'*. It is against this sort of historic background that we should judge the activities of those clerics at Windsor.

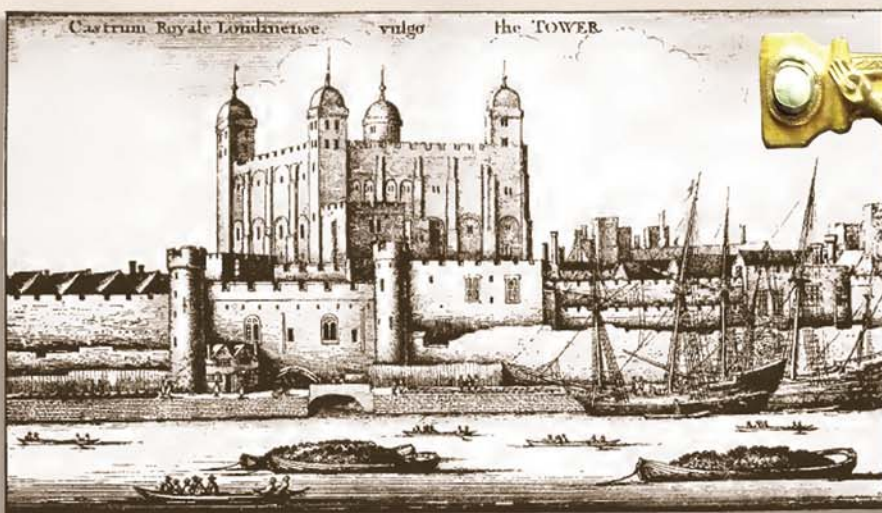
Seemingly worn down by the confused and lame excuses of those at the college and chapel, one of the commissioners reported back saying, *'we have done as moche as our simple witte by all waies and meanes could devise'*. The inevitable followed and the Privy Council ordered that what remained at Windsor should



be delivered up for the king's use. This was done in October 1552 and the list of the items shows it to have been a valuable haul, including '*the foote of the Crosse of gold, garnished with sondrye stones, many lacking, and also lacking a lion of gold*'. It appears from the evidence given to the commissioners that a single '*lion of gold*' had been sold four years earlier, hence the reference to one being missing. We know from records examined earlier (page 214) that there were seven lions in all. The whole shipment was taken to the Tower of London and King Edward issued instructions that the silver and silver gilt was '*to be put to coyne [coin] with convenient spede*' by the Royal Mint, but that the gold plate was to be preserved for further consideration. A receipt was issued on the 10th of November, the two parties involved being those responsible for the Jewel House in the Tower and the Treasurer of the Royal Mint.

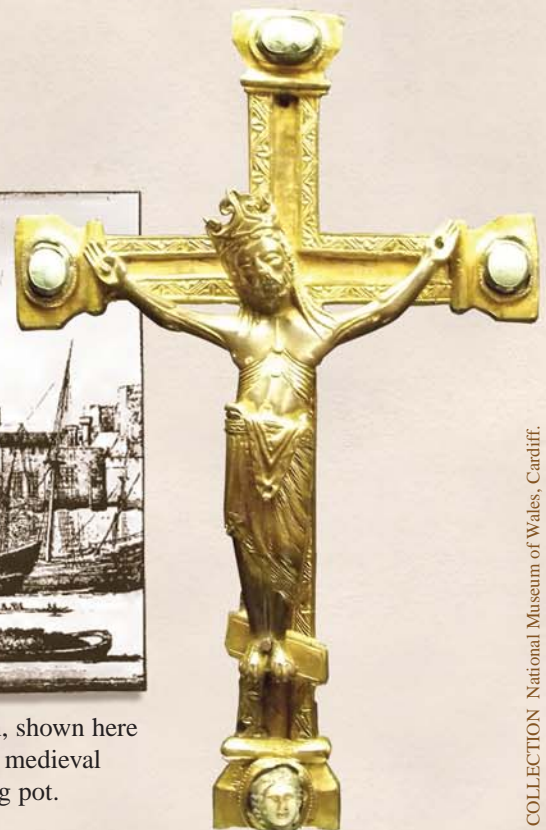
All of the items are listed and briefly described in these documents from 1552, and they were weighed in the Tower on the 25th of October, the precious metals and gemstones amounting to a little over 685 ounces, or about 20 kilograms. While the base of the *Welsh Cross* is recorded, there is no sign of the cross itself in these records, an omission that is somewhat puzzling. Had all its gold, silver and jewels been sold by those at Windsor before the commissioners arrived in the summer of 1552? Evidence given in response to Hoby's enquiries shows that three canons named Williams, Barker and Molet are said to have taken parts of the cross to sell in London just three years earlier, but what remained of it is not recorded. And nor is the relic of the Holy Wood that was within it, but such objects were now so strictly taboo that no one is likely to have mentioned it, let alone recorded it in official documents bound for the king and his Privy Council. It was now simply a piece of wood, and yet it had remained a royal treasure since the time of Edward I – receiving nearly three hundred years of exalted status.

The record of the weighing in the Tower was remarkably thorough, and as well as the valuable items they also weighed '*crystal and wood*', which amounted to just over 20 ounces, or some 580 grams. Could this have included the fragment of wood that had been seized from Wales? A large piece of the True Cross did then mysteriously appear in the Tower of London, an item considered so important to the monarchy that it was even kept with the Crown Jewels for security. Was this the last surviving remnant of the *Welsh Cross*?



Cartloads of church treasures were delivered to the Tower of London, shown here in an etching by Wenceslaus Hollar (1607-1677). Many beautiful medieval artefacts, similar to this crucifix, were destined for the melting pot.

ILLUSTRATION from Hind's *Wenceslaus Hollar*, 1922.



COLLECTION National Museum of Wales, Cardiff.





A piece of the Stump  
of the Crosse of  
Our Saviour





pparently, little remains of the *Welsh Cross* as we enter this final part of our pilgrimage through the many lives and landscapes that have shaped our journey, which in turn has formed the narrative of this journal. One of the relic's last official duties had taken place in 1506, when King Philip of Castile (1478-1506) was shipwrecked during a heavy storm in the English Channel. He was taken from the Dorset coast to meet King Henry VII at Windsor Castle, where he was sworn in as a Knight of the Garter. As was customary, the ceremony involved swearing an oath on the *Welsh Cross*, which, the records tell us, lay on a cushion made of cloth of gold. Philip's six-week stay as King Henry's 'guest' at Windsor also involved a treaty-signing, which again required him to swear on '*the true Cross of our Saviour to every Article of this Treaty*', the whole event being described in minute detail in the *Register of the Most Noble Order of the Garter* (1724).

Storms and Saint Helen's 4th-century finds from the Holy Land seem to have a legendary and at times miraculous synchronicity. In addition to the True Cross, Helen is said to have found the nails used at the crucifixion, and one of these was also utilised to calm the waves of the Adriatic Sea, when she was afloat with her precious cargo. When the Count of Flanders, Robert II (c.1065-1111) was returning from the First Crusade, he also had a stormy experience involving his True Cross relic, which had been given to him by the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Threatened with catastrophe, the count swore that if he survived the storm he would give the relic to wherever he managed to safely land, which turned out to be near a church in Flanders, dedicated to the 8th-century Saint Walpurga of England's West Saxon dynasty. With much pomp and ceremony, the count gifted the relic of the cross to the church, and it was paraded around the town in annual processions that continued over the centuries. As things transpired the count came to a watery end, having been mortally wounded in battle he fell into a river and drowned. With just a hint of irony, Saint Walpurga is invoked by those in peril from water and particularly storms at sea.

We have read in the previous chapter that the ultimate fate of the *Welsh Cross* was sealed at Windsor, just a few decades after the Spanish King Philip's prestigious encounter. And then, quite inexplicably, a large piece of wood from the True Cross appears in the Tower of London, stored in a sack and kept with the Crown Jewels. This is the final focus of our research into the Gwynedd relic's long history, following the 'visitations' of 1552 by the commissioners representing the young King Edward VI. His seizures at Windsor can seem somewhat excessive, when even dining at the College of Saint George turned into a challenge: '*cups, saltcellars and spoons were inventoried as "fit for his Majesty's service" and were carried off as "tending to superstitious uses"*.'<sup>1</sup> A rather spurious excuse. We know that the actual piece of the True Cross was not inventoried as such, and in these anti-Catholic times an item of very definite '*superstitious uses*' like this would inevitably go unrecorded. So where did the relic that then appeared in the Tower come from? And equally pertinent, where did it end up?

While we cannot be absolutely certain that the relic in the Tower was what remained of the *Welsh Cross* from the Chapel of Saint George, the conjecture that it was is largely based on the fact that it was kept among the Crown Jewels, thus showing it to have been a royal possession from an equally royal chapel. It had been venerated there by kings since the time Edward III lodged it at Windsor in the 1350s, and successive monarchs knew of its importance, even though veneration of relics had fallen from favour in the realm some two hundred years later. And then there was the issue of the relic's noteworthy size, a subject we shall return to later. Inevitably, this evidence remains purely circumstantial, so despite not having the evidential credibility of it being 'beyond reasonable doubt', we shall continue to examine what little evidence is available to formulate a case that should support the conjecture that this was indeed the Welsh relic in the Tower.

After the death of the teenage Edward VI in 1553, Lady Jane Grey (c.1536-1554) became *de facto* monarch of England, and she too was a teenager destined for a short life and an even shorter reign, becoming known to history as 'The Nine Days Queen'. Her cousin Edward had nominated her as successor in his Will, side-lining his half-sisters, Mary and Elizabeth, but the politics of the day were wrapped up in the religious struggles of the continually evolving Reformation. The Privy Council decided to proclaim Mary the rightful



queen and Jane was imprisoned in the Tower of London, yet another victim of the religion-driven power struggles of the day. She was beheaded for high treason in February 1554, Mary I (1516-1558) having been crowned in October 1553. Known to history as 'Bloody Mary', she was a passionate Roman Catholic who sought to reinstate Rome's lost influence in England's religious and political affairs, burning at the stake hundreds of dissenters during her five-year reign. In reality, the prevailing climate meant religion and politics were inseparable. Following Mary's death in 1558, England's new queen, Elizabeth I (1533-1603) ascended the throne, the last of the Tudor dynasty. Once more the pendulum of Christian sectarianism swung towards Protestantism, with countless Catholics consigned to the Tower of London and ultimately the gibbet or stake. Failing to endorse the royal *Act of Supremacy* carried equally severe penalties under Elizabeth as it had under her father, Henry VIII – imprisonment and often death.

The next dynasty to occupy the English throne was that of the Stuarts, commencing with James I (1566-1625), who was also the sixth King James to rule Scotland, the crowns of the two countries becoming united at his coronation in 1603. While crowns may have been united, the on-going discord between Catholics and Protestants continued in his reign. James himself appears to have endeavoured to remain tolerant, despite Parliament passing the *Popish Recusants Act* of 1605, following the much celebrated Gunpowder Plot of that year. This legislation imposed further onerous restrictions on Catholics, as the new Church of England and Parliament – unsurprisingly – went into a rather paranoid mode. The failed attempt to blow-up the House of Lords as the king opened Parliament on 5th November was often referred to as the '*Jesuit Treason*'. Evidence presented at the trial in January 1606 of the alleged conspirators makes the Flemish/Belgian Jesuit involvement suspiciously apparent: '*And in the Spanish Court, about two months after his arrival there, doth Christopher Wright meet with Guy Fawkes, who upon the 22nd of June was employed out of Flanders from Brussels by Sir William Stanley, Hugh Owen (whose finger hath been in every treason which hath been of late years detected), and*

*Baldwyn the Legier Jesuit in Flanders*'.<sup>2</sup> Before long the '*Fiery Jesuits*' were being seen as responsible for not only the Gunpowder Plot but also the Great Fire of London in 1666.

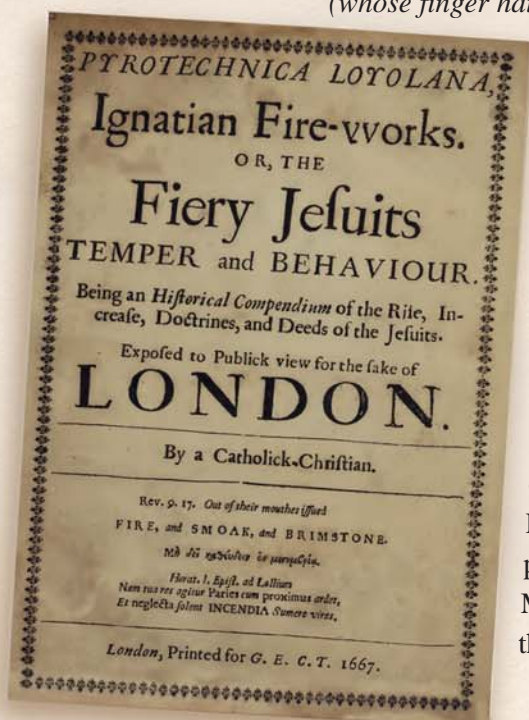
Some two centuries later, writing in a Catholic periodical in 1882, a Jesuit priest named John Morris (1826-1893) drew together some intriguing research elements for an article entitled, *The Holy Cross: The Relic from the Tower*.<sup>3</sup> Morris had worked for the Archbishop of Westminster for six years, and this was followed by a stay in Belgium where he is said to have accessed many archives of Catholic organisations, including those of the Jesuits, all to facilitate his researches into this relic in the Tower of London. Some of his material is drawn from the 1870 book by Charles Rohault de Fleury, particularly the provenance details which the French author publishes from his correspondence with various churchmen and others. Morris describes how during the reign of James I (from 1603 to 1625), there existed in the Tower of London '*an old bag of canvas*' bearing a

### Elizabethan 'Reform' 1583

*"One William Mutton, sometime Sheriff of Chester, had no greater felicity than in breaking of crosses and chalices, and such like, which he performed most when he was in his office, and would at the time have broken the high cross in Chester, but denied by some present, he came after in the night and broke it. Shortly after, even as he came by the same place, he was suddenly stricken with sickness, and was thence carried home, where he died miserably, and his goods procured much trouble after his death."*



TEXT Foley's *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus*, 1878.  
DRAWING Hemingway's *History of the City of Chester*, 1831.





label which read, '*a peece of the stumpe of the Crosse of our Saviour*'. It was kept in an old chest among the Crown Jewels, despite the destruction of countless similar relics in the preceding years.

No proper explanation is given for the use of the word '*stumpe*' and it does not appear in connection with any other references to relics of the True Cross. Perhaps it was the fact that it was an unusually large portion that led to this description, since it is extremely unlikely that the wooden object itself would have anything on it to indicate that it was the bottom of the cross; i.e. the part that went into the ground. Nowadays, we would use the word stump to indicate, for example, the remains of a tree in the earth after it had been felled. Morris infers this meaning in his article, engaging in assorted and ultimately fruitless calculations to determine the overall size that the original cross may have been. However, the meaning at the time the sack was labelled (16th/17th-century?) would simply have indicated that it was all that remained, the word stump implying what is left of something that once consisted of more; the stump of an amputated limb, for example.

Semantics aside, the wooden object in the Tower of London made an appearance in the hands of an unnamed individual, who was a clerk of the Board of the Green Cloth, an administrative position in the royal household concerned with financial auditing and paying the various members of staff. The 'Green Cloth' in the board's title refers to the fabric embroidered with the arms of the king's 'Accompting House'. It appears from the account by Morris that, '*this gentleman brought the whole piece as it was in a bag to Mr. Pudsey, a Yorkshire Catholic gentleman, and an intimate friend of that officer of the Tower*'. Thomas Pudsey split off a piece for himself and the remainder was returned to the Tower of London. In 1650, when writing to her sister, Mrs Pudsey remarked on the relic in the Tower: '*if it had not been of great esteem it would never have been kept there*'. Unfortunately, neither she nor anyone else could recall how this piece of the Holy Wood in a sack came to be in the Tower at the time, stored with the Crown Jewels, and the contemporary state records are inevitably silent on this particular point. Such things were of an unspeakable nature at the time.

Morris does not have anything further to say about Thomas Pudsey himself, but here state papers are more forthcoming, particularly those known as the Cecil Papers in the archives of Hatfield House in Hertfordshire. William Cecil, Lord Burghley was the chief advisor to Queen Elizabeth I and as such a key figure in the politics and religious affairs of the day. Among the Cecil Papers is a document dated the 21st of December 1606<sup>4</sup> and it concerns evidence given in connection with the Pudsey household of Barforth in Yorkshire, who were secretly participating in forbidden Catholic services. The witness, a servant named John Nicollson, refers to a '*popish priest*' holding mass and confessions in Barforth Hall, adding that these '*papists rested much upon the end of this parliament*', the unsuccessful Gunpowder Plot being very much a live issue at the time. Nicollson adds that '*the butler in old Mrs Pudsey's house did give him a cross to wear about his neck*'.

Thomas Pudsey had died in 1620 and his widow had then given the relic – '*a piece the length of two palms*' – to Edward Lusher, who had entered the Jesuit priesthood in 1610. Also, '*a fragment the size of a nutmeg*' had been cut off this piece by Lusher before he departed from Mrs Pudsey, who remarked in her 1650 letter to her sister how efficacious it had proved to be. Lusher was originally from Norwich and he was definitely in England in the 1640s, although actually operating out of Ghent in the Flemish region of Belgium. Lusher was Mrs Pudsey's confessor and in gratitude for the gift he offered thirty masses for her and her late husband. The Jesuit priest kept the object for several years and subsequently it was given to a Antony Hunter, who in turn gave some of it to a John Heaton, both of whom were members of the Jesuit Society of Jesus in their English Province. Father Lusher died in 1665 as a result of catching Bubonic Plague, the victims of which he was bravely helping in London during that devastating outbreak, which killed some fifteen percent of London's population.

From the article by Morris we learn that further portions of Father Lusher's piece had been removed from it, and these all make connections with Jesuits in Belgium. Morris says that the earliest he knew of was in Ghent and the '*Vicars Capitular of Tournai in 1668*', adding that they had received a piece from the Jesuits in Courtrai: '*Another portion was approved by the Vicar Capitular of St. Omers, October 13 1691. Yet another*



portion was approved by the Archbishop of Mechlin, which had been given by Father Thomas Hunter to Clare de Grobendonck, Abbess of La Cambre'. Fragments of the relic were being disseminated well into the early 1700s, according to Morris. Whether any of these individuals and institutions were aware of their fragments' origin remains to be seen, and under the circumstances they would be turning a particularly blind eye towards the Tower of London.

The Jesuit establishment at St. Omers reappears in the provenance of a relic of the True Cross held by the convent of St. Mary's in York. In his history of this Catholic house, published in 1887, the Jesuit priest H. J. Coleridge endeavours to explore the relic's background, although he admits that it is '*shrouded in secrecy*' and the date of its acquisition is '*unknown*'. The reliquary itself is made of silver-gilt and measures about 5 inches/13 cm long and is in the form of a 'pectoral' cross, intended to have a cord attached and to be worn suspended around the neck. The Latin inscription claims that the relic itself originated with Arnulf, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, the date inscribed being 1099. Arnulf was the chaplain of Robert of Normandy, William the Conqueror's brother, at the time of the First Crusade, although Arnulf was not officially appointed to the role until 1112. During the crusade he claimed to have discovered the True Cross kept in Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre, presumably since the time of Saint Helen and her son Constantine the Great.

The discrepancy in the patriarchal date aside, other dating evidence consists of the seals on the relic being those of St. Omers, during the period 1657 to 1662, and at that time the '*stumpe*' from the Tower of London was certainly in the possession of the Jesuits in Belgium. It would appear, therefore, that the relic in York was probably yet another thin slice of that large piece of the True Cross in the Tower. As we shall discover, provenance fabrication surrounds several of these relics, each well and truly '*shrouded in secrecy*'.

Turning to another Catholic publication, this time from 1926, we find amongst the letters' page of *The Tablet* <sup>5</sup> a further link with the Jesuits. The writer of the letter, a Jesuit priest named Reginald Riley, confesses that the fragment of the True Cross kept at their Saint Mary's Lowe House, in the town of Saint Helens, Lancashire, originally came from the piece that was in the Tower of London. Father Riley quotes a document from 1727 that describes the object as '*a very great and glorious relick of the most Holy Cross*'. He goes on to say that the regional head, the Provincial of the Jesuits (probably Father John Clarke) had, according to an 18th-century English Jesuit named Edmund Smith, cut off their fragment kept at Lowe House from what was originally Father Lusher's piece, by then in the possession of the Jesuit College in Ghent.

Pope Clement XIV's brief of 1773 ordering the suppression of the Jesuits was all encompassing in its approach, threatening excommunication to any who '*do carry their audacity so far as to impugn, combat, or even write or speak about the said suppression, or the reasons and motives of it*'.<sup>6</sup> Jesuits' property was thereby forfeited to the Catholic diocese in which they had previously operated, hence the relic falling into the hands of the Bishop of Ghent after 1773. In his article Morris says that the relic had belonged to the English Province of the Society of Jesus for '*a century and a quarter*', so that would give us a date of around 1648, had the Diocese of Ghent acquired the relic in 1773. Other evidence would suggest the Jesuits acquired it before 1648.

In his letter to *The Tablet* Riley suggests that the relic in the Tower of London was '*probably brought there from Holy Rood [Scotland] by James I*'. Riley's remark about its provenance may be deliberately misleading. King James issued warrants for inventories to be taken of the Crown Jewels as early as 1603 and again in 1605, and then also in the regnal year 1618-19. There are no mentions of the relic in the Tower in these inventories, although this does not necessarily mean that it had left by these dates. Such objects would still have been regarded as 'popish superstition' at the time, so it would not automatically have been listed as royal treasure. It was simply an old sack with a label in the Tower's Jewel House, and no one would have been keen to acknowledge its presence in the records of the early 1600s.

Nevertheless, it may be worth considering Riley's assertion more closely to see if there are any records to support it. There is an inventory <sup>7</sup> from 1493 of treasures held at Holy Rood Abbey in Edinburgh, this being during the reign of King James IV of Scotland; Henry VII was reigning in England at the time.



Three ornamented crosses are listed, each made of either silver or gold and decorated with gemstones. Two are listed as containing fragments of the True Cross, but no indication of the actual relics' sizes can be gleaned from the brief descriptions of the artefacts. One of the crosses is listed as having a base made of silver, so it was obviously intended to be free-standing, but this one did not contain a relic. As with the cross, or monstrance, from Scotland's Fort Augustus Abbey (illustrated on page 239), the relics in the two gold jewellery crosses would have been quite small, like so many others. As we know, the one in the *Welsh Cross* was unusually large, and it remained quite substantial into the 19th-century, even after various bits had been chipped off and distributed amongst the Jesuit community much earlier.

Also of relevance, there are inventories from the 1620s, published in an antiquarian journal <sup>8</sup> in the 19th-century. These show that James I was sending various items of treasure to his son and heir Charles, who was in Spain at the time. None of the artefacts listed mention any reliquary-style crosses, simply various items of gold jewellery. Since the *Welsh Cross* had been stripped of its precious materials by the 1550s, leaving only the large wooden relic itself, Reginald Riley's suggested provenance for the fragment at Saint Mary's Lowe House does not appear to connect it with the recorded activities of King James I. Nevertheless, Riley does claim that their fragment did come from the one in the Tower, but what he fails to disclose is that it was in the hands of his fellow Jesuits at the time, rather than the custodians of his majesty's Jewel House. Riley is hardly likely to mention this fact as he was himself a Jesuit.

Again in Lancashire, the Jesuit College of Stonyhurst (founded in 1794) near Clitheroe still has a fragment in its collection, described in 1870 as '*a morsel of wood, of light chocolate colour, carefully preserved within a crucifix*'.<sup>9</sup> Stonyhurst itself was provided for the Society of Jesus by the Jesuit-educated Thomas Weld of Lulworth Castle. The reliquary (pictured overleaf on page 229), although not a crucifix as such, is a fine example of the work of Flemish silversmiths, and the wood fragment is also recorded as having originated from the large piece that was originally in the Tower of London. So also did several smaller fragments, following continual sub-division and distribution of the relic amongst the Roman Catholic community, particularly by the Jesuits. The Stonyhurst reliquary was donated to the college in 1824 and is said to contain a remnant of Father Lusher's piece that had previously been in Norwich, before arriving in the Lancashire Jesuit College as a gift. Prior to arriving at Stonyhurst, it had also been reduced somewhat, a portion having been given to a Lady Lovat, a Catholic member of Scotland's nobility. Simon, Lord Lovat was executed on the 9th of April 1747, yet another victim of that persecutory period.

According to a 19th-century, comprehensive study of the history of the Society of Jesus in England, the author, the Jesuit priest Henry Foley (1811-1891), says that the fragment in Norwich was '*a very large one: a foot in length, and about four inches thick*'.<sup>10</sup> Precisely how much was eventually shaved off this remarkably large piece of the Tower relic is uncertain, although Morris tells us that Lady Lovat's portion '*was enough to make a cross*'. It was given to her by Frederick Husenbeth (1796-1872), a leading light in the Catholic community of Northampton. Husenbeth had worked on a book (published 1849) with Edward Robert Petre (1794-1853), describing the continental Catholic establishments after the Dissolution of the Monasteries in Henry VIII's time. Following Husenbeth's death in 1872, his substantial collection of crucifixes and reliquaries was sold at Norwich.

A further portion of the relic made an appearance in Essex in the early 1700s, the journal of the Essex Recusant Society (1971) telling us that it was in a '*large silver-gilt reliquary of French or Flemish workmanship, containing two slivers of wood, one about 3 inches long by half an inch wide, the other about 2 inches long and of the same width. Both pieces appear to be about one sixteenth of an inch thick*'. Apparently, the owner of this relic, Catherine Lady Petre (1697-1785), had acquired it in 1713 from the Jesuits in Ghent, along with assorted documents authenticating the fragment. These show that it had originated from the '*stumpe*' in the Tower of London, and the same article in this journal quotes the following from one of the original documents: '*The Jesuit Fathers [in Ghent] asked for the fact that the relic had come from the Tower to be suppressed in any document of authentication, lest the king hear about it and be offended, and demand*



## *The Stonyhurst Cross*





*its return*'.<sup>11</sup> This most revealing statement makes it abundantly clear that its removal from the Tower of London was done without the permission of its royal owners, but then it was not inventoried like everything else in the Jewel House. Consequently, its disappearance would not have shown up during the periodic audits, particularly those when a change of official occurred and items were thoroughly scrutinised. However, there were those who knew of its presence, but who took it and when?

Another member of the Petre family who could have filled in a few gaps was Sir William Petre (c.1505-1572), a Secretary of State under four monarchs: Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I. He was first appointed to this high office under Henry in 1544, and as a member of the Privy Council he would have been well briefed about the visitations of the commissioners, including those who descended on Windsor in 1552 and carted off the remaining treasures from Saint George's Chapel. It is likely, therefore, that he would have known what was brought in to the Tower of London on that occasion, and the fact that he also served under the passionately Catholic Queen Mary demonstrates his true religious affiliation, this monarch being especially selective and biased in her senior appointments. Like many others in that era of religious sectarianism, he would have been discreet about his religious commitments, declaring them only when it was prudent to do so, carefully observing which way the wind was blowing through four stormy reigns. His younger brother, Robert Petre was an auditor in the Royal Exchequer, and '*he was certainly averse to Queen Elizabeth's change of the national religion*'<sup>12</sup> after Catholic Mary died. What, if anything, these two brothers knew about that relic in the Jewel House of the Tower remains unrecorded.

As do much of the activities of the Jesuits in 17th-century Ghent, but silence prevails in that period of history. And for good reason, as John Morris makes clear in his 1882 article, especially when quoting from a letter by a Joseph Symeons, who says that, '*the Bishop [of Ghent] would not upon this authority permit it [the relic] to be exposed*'. Morris goes on to explain that the Bishop of Ghent '*clave off a thin piece the length of the original relic, which, placed in an ancient cross of crystal, is now used for the Good Friday Office in the Cathedral and for the procession on the Rogation days*'. Another off-cut from the original made an appearance as recently as the 1990s, when it was given to a Father Godfrey Poage, an American Vatican official, the piece being contained in a silver reliquary bearing signet seals to indicate its authenticity and *relatively recent provenance*.

Who finally took the relic from the king's Jewel House at the Tower? We are simply told by Morris that the '*stumpe*' was returned to the Tower by the unnamed clerk of the Board of the Green Cloth, after giving some to Thomas Pudsey, whose death took place in 1620, so that provides us with an upper limit on who that clerk may have been. Morris also makes the point in his article that the relic was in the Tower at the time of James I, who reigned from 1603 to 1625, so that further narrows the time frame in which we may be able to identify suspects. Another factor for consideration is that, whoever it was they must have had sufficient seniority at court to have accessed an item kept in the Jewel House at the Tower of London.

King James' ordinances from the second year (1604) of his reign reveal his majesty trying to combat rampant nepotism and other corrupt practices relating to the Board of the Green Cloth, and of the various families enjoying overtly preferential appointments, those of the Weldons stand out in the records of the time. The Weldon family members had enjoyed royally-appointed posts throughout the Tudor period, particularly Thomas Weldon (c.1500-1567), whose career was one of a steady climb through the ranks of the royal household's Green Cloth section. He started out as a clerk in 1520 and by the following decade he had added a senior post at Windsor Castle to his *curriculum vitae*. In 1540 he had achieved the role of first master of the household, and by 1552 he was promoted to cofferer (principal accounting officer) of the household, having responsibility for the day-to-day financing and smooth running of King Edward VI's domestic affairs.

Thomas Weldon was in that senior position when he was at the Tower of London with Hoby in October 1552, when all the valuable items from Saint George's Chapel arrived to be sorted and weighed, and Weldon had also played his part during the actual visitation, when the Dean and Canons were subjected to giving account of themselves and their actions. Weldon saw what was arriving and countersigned the



inventory, which included the '*foote of the Crosse of gold, garnished with sondrye stones, many lacking, and also lacking a lion of gold*'. He remained a member of the Board of the Green Cloth until his death in 1567, by which time Elizabeth I was on the throne, and the queen's *Domestic Papers*<sup>13</sup> provide two brief entries that link to the use by Morris of the phrase '*an intimate friend of that officer of the Tower*'. The first relates to payments and receipts being dealt with by those employed by the Board of the Green Cloth, the entry for the 14th of January 1574 including the name of a Thomas Pudsey. The second dates from 1584 and refers to a Thomas Weldon, a young relative of the older Thomas, one of the team of commissioners at Windsor in 1552 who died in 1567.

Nepotism was obviously rife among the royal household and office holders connected with the Board of the Green Cloth evidently excelled in this practice, starting with Hugh Weldon in the time of Henry VIII, progressing to his son Anthony, who was a clerk to the board and died in 1613. There was also another clerk, Ralph Weldon, who died in office in 1609, having served both Queen Elizabeth and King James. In a work purported to be by Sir Anthony Weldon (1583-1648), the author complains about how King James I was much given to chopping and changing his court appointments: '*a pretty faculty of putting out and in. By this you may perceive in what his wisdom consisted; but in great and weighty affairs, he was ever at his wits end*'. The reference to '*putting out and in*' appears to express the writer's irritation by the king's efforts to reform his household appointments system, and in particular those staff handling the royal expenses – the Board of the Green Cloth.

However, much uncertainty surrounds the authorship of this work attributed to Sir Anthony Weldon, a scathing account of *The Court and Character of King James*,<sup>14</sup> eventually published in 1650 two years after Weldon's death. The author was clearly unhappy with the king's interference on appointments and its disruptive effect on the well entrenched nepotism at court. King James died in 1625 and he had previously dismissed Weldon from his appointment at court, thought to be because of Sir Anthony's negative attitude towards the Scots. Weldon later rose to an influential position under Oliver Cromwell and the Parliamentarians, which all combines to make his attitude towards the Stuarts quite explicit. Weldon died in 1648 before the Civil War came to an end in 1651, eventually followed by the restoration of the monarchy in the form of Charles II in 1660.

Having suggested the Weldons as potential culprits for the relic's temporary removal from the Tower to the Pudsey household, the main question facing us is how and when this was accomplished? We know that Cromwell and Parliament had sold off the Crown Jewels in 1649, and Sir Thomas Weldon had died the year before, so the relic's journey to Pudsey must have taken place several years before then, probably a few years either side of 1600, given Thomas Pudsey's death in 1620. Cromwell's puritanism would certainly have led him to view such an item as 'popish folly', so along with the other treasures in the Jewel House, the relic should then have met its end. As we shall see, it did survive these constitutional upheavals, so someone must have been protecting it and they would obviously have been devout Catholics.

If we accept that the relic from the *Welsh Cross* did arrive at the Tower of London from Windsor in 1552, then who would have been aware enough of its importance to place it in a sack with a label and store it with the Crown Jewels? Access to the Jewel House would certainly have been limited for obvious reasons, but the most senior official would have held keys to this depository of treasure and he was the Constable of the Tower. In 1552 that position was held by Sir John Gage (1479-1556), who was so highly regarded by Henry VIII that the king appointed him not only constable (1540) but also a councillor to his son and heir, Edward by the king's Will. Gage was also made a Knight of the Garter in 1541, so he would certainly have been aware of the *Welsh Cross*, even though by then the artefact was not used formally in such ceremonial activities at Saint George's Chapel. As one of the commissioners for taking the surrender of religious houses during the ongoing dissolution, Gage benefited personally from the process, as observed in a book by one of his descendants, who said he '*shared largely himself in the spoils of the church*'.<sup>15</sup>

Sir John Gage was definitely a Catholic, but like so many others he took a pragmatic approach by



## Conspiracy at the Tower of London

Two senior members of the royal household stand out in the story of how the relic came to disappear



Sir Anthony Weldon

from the Tower of London, and both men had influence with the Board of the Green Cloth. The heraldic device of the 'Sun in Splendour' was adopted as the symbol of the Jesuit Order at its foundation in 1540, this logo then becoming known as a 'Christogram' and it also appears in the arms of Catholic Sir John Gage.



Sir John Gage

being discreet and careful about who knew what on his position with the highly volatile religious questions of the day. When the young Edward VI died, Gage did not support Lady Jane Grey's short-lived bid for the throne, and he resigned his appointment as Constable of the Tower in July 1553, only to be re-appointed by the new Catholic Queen Mary in the following month of August, clearly demonstrating his religious affiliation at the time. Of his various senior roles under three monarchs, Gage's appointment as Comptroller of the Household in 1540 is particularly significant, since that made him an *ex officio* member of the Board of the Green Cloth, of which his son James was a member, becoming Master of the Household by 1540. They would certainly have regarded a relic of the True Cross with high, albeit covert esteem. Couple this with the fact that Thomas Pudsey's mother-in-law, Agnes, was a daughter of Sir John Gage, then we start to perceive a chain of connecting links in this investigation.

A further link that brings the Jesuits back into the frame is the fact that several individuals from the Gage family were members of the Society of Jesus. Even Sir John's coat of arms incorporates an heraldic device known as the 'Sun in Splendour', the specific design being composed of straight rays representing the sun's light, while the wavy rays are emblematic of its heat. The graphic symbol known as the 'Christogram' (illustrated above) had been adopted by the Jesuits when they were founded in 1540, and it remains in use today. Some believe that this solar motif has its origin in Roman times and was linked to the cult of *Sol Invictus*. The finger of suspicion continues pointing towards a Jesuit intrigue in the fate of that relic in the Tower. And if we return briefly to the account of the reliquary at St. Mary's convent in York, the Jesuit author happens to mention that their treasured relic spent some time in the protective custody of a 'Mrs Gage', although no further details are provided. A coincidence?

It is not known with any certainty the secretive comings and goings of the Jesuit priest Edward Lusher, Philippa Pudsey's confessor. He was definitely in London in the 1630s because he was then administering to the spiritual needs of the imprisoned Henry Morse (1595-1645) in April of 1633. At the expressed recommendation of the wife of Charles I, the Catholic Queen Consort, Henrietta Maria, Morse went into exile abroad in 1637. And none too soon: a royal proclamation had been issued ordering all Catholic priests to leave the country by April 1641. Morse had previously been captured in 1626, while attempting to leave the country, and after four years in prison he was ordered to leave England; he clearly had intended to anyway. Lusher was responsible for admitting Morse to the Society of Jesus, which was regarded by the Protestants of the time as a wicked enemy of the state, intent on overturning the status quo with papal backing. Rumour piled upon rumour and Morse was hanged at Tyburn – one of many Catholics who endured



terrible treatment in that vengeful period, which evidently generated 'martyrs' on a regular basis. Body parts of these victims themselves became treasured relics among surviving Catholics, and in the 1500s Pope Gregory XIII had even declared that such remnants could be used for the consecration of altars.

It was not just Jesuits who set out to rescue relics and the like from the ongoing destruction. Many other Catholics sought to salvage precious objects, including windows about to be smashed at Canterbury Cathedral in 1643. On page 207 we looked at this issue and it is in the *Cathedrall Newes from Canterbury*, published in London in 1644, that its author, Richard Culmer, delights in this wanton destruction: '*And then that work of Reformation went on; the Commissioners fell presently to work on the great idolatrous window [...]; for which windows (some affirm) many thousand pounds have been offered by Out-landish Papists*'. There must have been a thriving black market in items seized from churches, with well-placed Protestants getting rich quick through supplying eager Catholic buyers with confiscated items.

Of the many relics that Catholics treasured and rescued from destruction, those relating to the so-called Passion of Jesus were valued the most, and John Morris states that parts of the Crown of Thorns were appearing at Jesuit institutions. He says that the Bishop of St. Omer saw these particular relics and approved their sanctity in 1666. The Glastonbury relic of one of the holy thorns made its last appearance in history in 1657, when it was bequeathed by a priest named Peter Warnford and recorded in 1881 as being '*carefully kept by the Dean of the Rosary in London*'.<sup>16</sup>

While 'exporting' such vulnerable items from Reformation England, the Jesuits also made other acquisitions, if the Bishop of Peterborough is to be believed. Addressing the House of Lords on the 9th of December 1718, this prelate had stern words to say on the subject of missing historic documents: '*There is no English seminary abroad but what has too many of our manuscripts and loose papers in them, especially the Jesuits' colleges, where they best know the arts, and what they call the pious frauds, of stealing*'.<sup>17</sup> This does not so much indicate woefully inadequate security in the places where these things were kept, but rather the religious commitment of their custodians. Such was the facility afforded to friends and members of the Society of Jesus, that even the Tower of London seems to have posed little obstacle to a conspiracy of deeply religious officials, willing to commit theft from the Crown for their Catholic cause.

If the '*stumpe*' was the *Welsh Cross* relic taken from Windsor, then it would not have been in London for much more than sixty years before Pudsey's time. In his article Morris quotes from a letter dated 1671: '*there was a large piece of the Cross in the Tower in the time of Queen Anne of Denmark, though none at present*'. Anne was the consort of King James I from their marriage in 1589 to her death in 1619. So, if we take the earlier date, then it is less than forty years since the relic remnant of the *Welsh Cross* was removed from Windsor and, we may speculate, stored in the Tower of London. That it was kept with the Crown Jewels obviously makes it very important to the monarchy, and, as we now know, the *Welsh Cross* itself enjoyed high status with successive royal families of England. Morris makes a tantalisingly brief comment on the duration of its stay in the Tower, but provides neither citation nor further clarification: '*it was for a short time with the Crown jewels in the Tower of London*'. Had he told us what he meant by '*a short time*' we could have worked out when it arrived in the Tower, thus providing us with more circumstantial evidence of it having originated from Windsor. As the treasures at Saint George's Chapel were removed in the 1550s, then the Holy Wood from the *Welsh Cross* would not have been in the Tower for very long.

We are told that it was simply a large '*stumpe*' of wood being stored in a sack. Ordinarily, pieces of the True Cross were smallish and subjected to the handiwork of jewellers, forming a reliquary of a usually cruciform design, although other forms were also produced. What was in the sack was simply a piece of wood, since we know that the precious materials in which the *Welsh Cross* was once encased had been regularly and systematically stripped at Windsor and finally at the Tower. The letter from 1671 tells us that there was no relic left in the Tower of London and that it had disappeared without trace, so the likelihood is that its removal took place towards the close of the 16th-century and the beginning of the 17th-century, a period that saw the end of Elizabeth's reign in 1603 and the accession of James I that same year.



If we return to the French studies of the True Cross relics, mentioned at the end of chapter two of this book, we may examine the tables that Charles Rohault de Fleury published in France in 1870, and also those reproduced in James Bellord's thirty-two page booklet, published by the Catholic Truth Society in 1897. The first table gives the relics by largest size and the two in Belgium top the list. Number one is what is now known as the Drahm(al) Cross, which is kept in the Cathedral of St. Michael and St. Gudula, Brussels, said by Bellord, relying on Rohault de Fleury, to have been '*brought from the Holy Land by Florence III, Count of Holland*'. Count Floris III actually died of disease in 1190 and was buried at Antioch during the Third Crusade, so he obviously could not have returned with the relic. In Rohault de Fleury's book (plate XV reproduced overleaf on page 235) we see the Drahm(al) Cross in outline, running diagonally and captioned '*Bruxelles Ste. Gudule*'. The Drahm(al) Cross – also known simply as the Brussels Cross – is said to be of Anglo-Saxon origin, the inscribed name 'Drahmal' being the maker's name. It is widely thought, although without hard evidence, to contain the '*Lignum Domini*' (Wood of the Lord) that was given to King Alfred of Wessex by the pope around the year 884. This claimed provenance appears to be largely based on the fact that the object's inscription is in the late West-Saxon style. It appears somewhat improbable that an apparently English relic of the True Cross would travel all the way to the Holy Land, only to be brought back to Europe in the 12th-century by Count Floris III. So what is behind this deeply flawed provenance?

An alternative provenance is proffered in a lecture given by the Bishop of Bristol in 1902.<sup>18</sup> Bishop Browne said that the Drahm(al) Cross was bequeathed to the Cathedral of St. Michael and St. Gudula in 1633, under the terms of the Will of Archduke Albert VII, who was sovereign ruler of the Habsburg Netherlands from 1598 to his death in 1621. He acquired this title through his wife, Isabella, who was the daughter of King Philip II of Spain, who in turn was the husband of England's passionate Catholic Queen Mary from 1554 to her death in 1558. In his youth Albert was made a cardinal in Rome by Pope Gregory XIII, who gave him the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem as his titular church, and it will be recalled from earlier in this book that this was Saint Helen's own 4th-century foundation, brimming with relics in her day, including those from her discovery in the Holy Land, the True Cross. Archduke Albert went on to play a significant part in the Counter-Reformation in the Habsburg Netherlands, seeking to restore Catholic influence in the Low Countries, and he made substantial cash donations to the Jesuits to support their ambitious building programmes in Brussels and Antwerp.

Bishop Browne then explains that the Drahm(al) Cross had been in the archduke's chapel in Brussels since 1605, and he recounts how the front of the cross was ravaged for its precious stones and gold plating by invading French troops in the late 18th-century. A rather botched 'restoration' job in 1793 consisted of

## The Drahm(al) or Brussels Cross

The Drahm(al) Cross carries the maker's name on the face shown below, reading '*Drahmal me worhte*'. There is also an Anglo-Saxon inscription on a strip made of silver, running around the edges of the cross and written in Roman letters. The inscription includes the names of three brothers, Aelfric, Aethlmaer and Athelwold, none of whom have so far been identified with certainty as historic characters, although their names show them to have been Anglo-Saxons. From the language and style of this inscription it has been possible to date it to the early 1100s.

DIMENSIONS  
H: 18.3ins/46.5cm  
W: 11ins/28cm

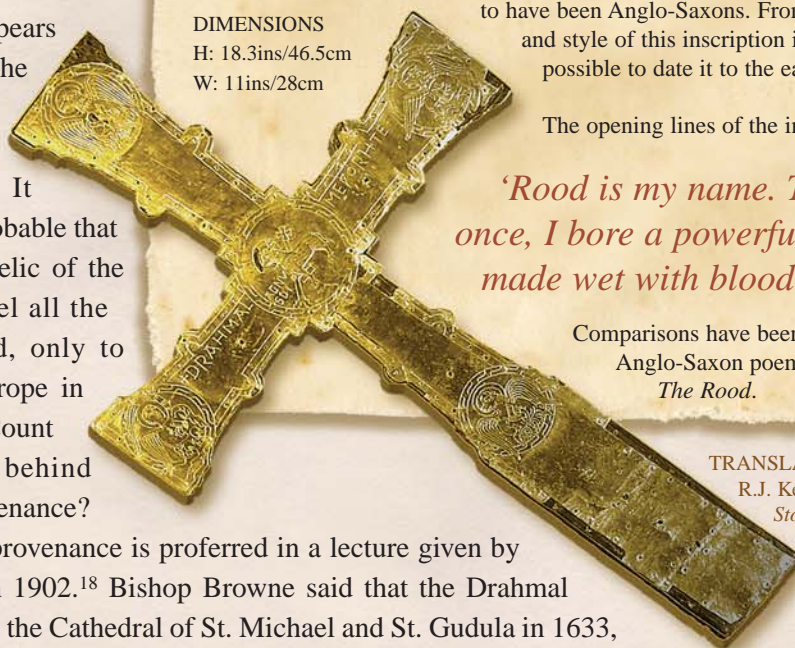
The opening lines of the inscription read:

*'Rood is my name. Trembling  
once, I bore a powerful king,  
made wet with blood'.*

Comparisons have been made with the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of The Rood*.

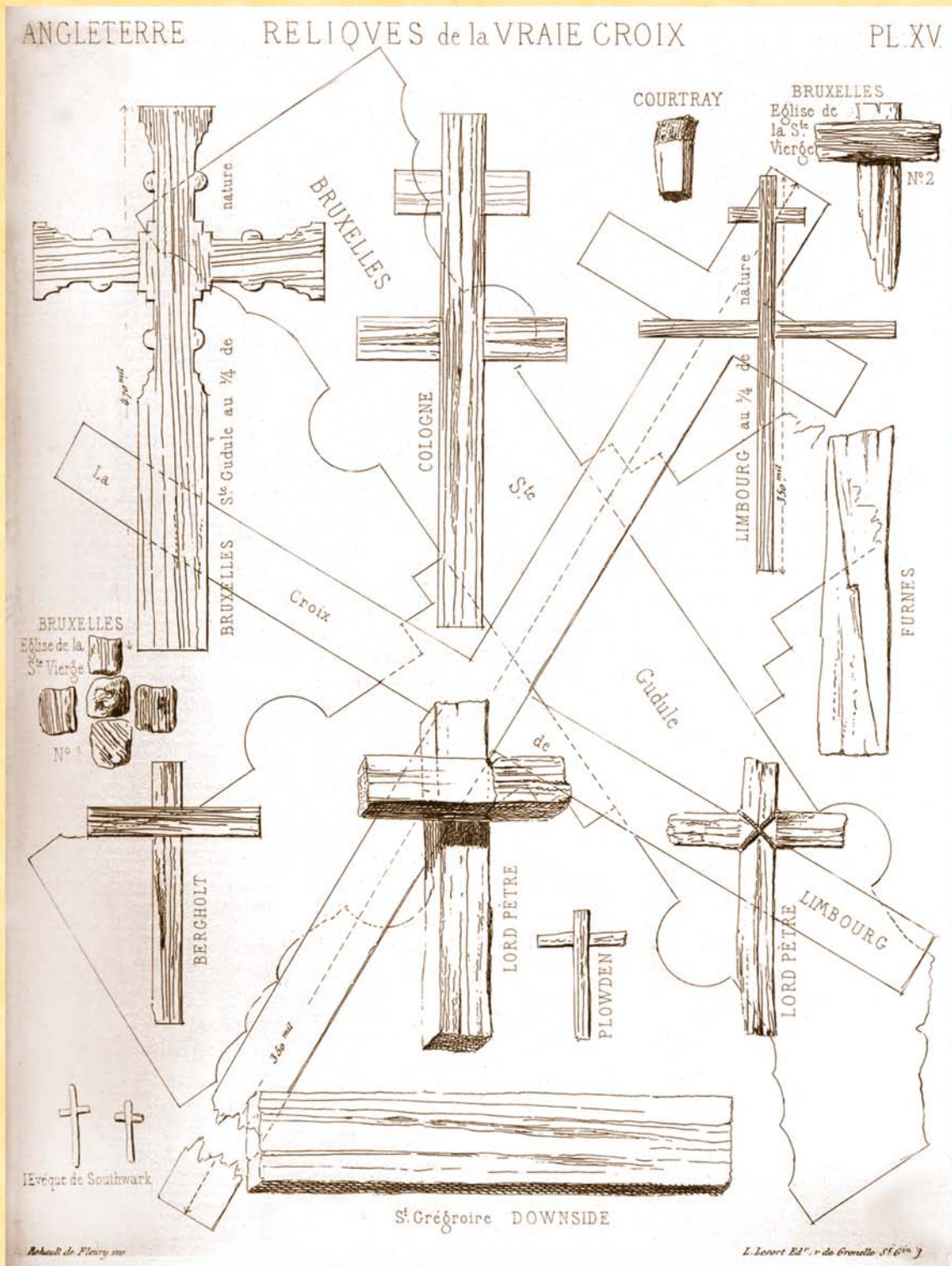
### TRANSLATION

R.J. Kelly and C.L. Quinn in  
*Stone, Skin and Silver: A  
Translation of the  
Dream of The  
Rood*, 1999.





## RELICS OF THE TRUE CROSS



This page of illustrations is from the study by Charles Rohault de Fleury, relative sizes being indicated for those shown in detail, the larger relics being in outline. In the lower half of the page are shown the two relics belonging to the Petre family, either side of the smaller Plowden fragment. Beneath these is the fragment at Downside Abbey, whose reliquary or monstrance is illustrated on page 239.



copper plates being fitted to the relic's damaged front. These were later removed to expose the cross, complete with its Anglo-Saxon inscriptions. The bishop weaves other details into his account, including making connections with 9th and 10th-century Wessex, and he also mentions that *'this copper covering, with the emblems of the Passion, is the front of the cross as we have seen it'*.

The *'emblems'* to which Browne refers sound remarkably like the insignia of the Society of Jesus, with its three nails from the crucifixion, shown on page 232 incorporated within the divine sun symbol. This would certainly suggest some involvement with the Jesuits, and Browne says that these emblems appeared on the covering of copper plates. When they were removed it revealed the cross as we see it today, with embossed silver plating illustrating the four evangelists and the Lamb of God symbol (*Agnus Dei*). This was originally the back of the artefact, the missing gold and jewel decoration having been on what was originally the front. The conflicting accounts of the provenance for this object are further compounded by research <sup>19</sup> published in 1939, suggesting that the Drahm Cross was given to Westminster Abbey by the Wessex royal family in the 1100s, but there is no truly reliable explanation for how and when it may have left England and ended up in the Low Countries. Yet again we are confronted with a conspiracy of silence, each provenance voiced tending to contradict another, clouding the truth with intrigue.

The second largest is the so-called Ghent Fragment, which is pictured overleaf on page 237 in another illustration from Rohault de Fleury's book, where it is captioned *'Croix de Gand'* – Cross of Ghent. The following quotations are taken from the documents the French author reproduces in his study. The Ghent fragment is believed to be the piece of the Tower relic that the Jesuit Edward Lusher acquired from Pudsey's widow, and which found its way to the Jesuit College in Ghent, before finally ending up with the Diocese of Ghent. In a letter dated the 31st of July 1775, the then Bishop of Ghent explains that, at the beginning of the 1700s some pieces were cut off the relic *'for the veneration of the faithful'*, adding that one was 9ins/23cm in length and *'which we hitherto preserve in our archives'*. This is indeed a very large fragment, far exceeding what most of these relics of the True Cross comprise in size, so here too those noteworthy references to the *Welsh Cross* relic as being large are brought to mind.

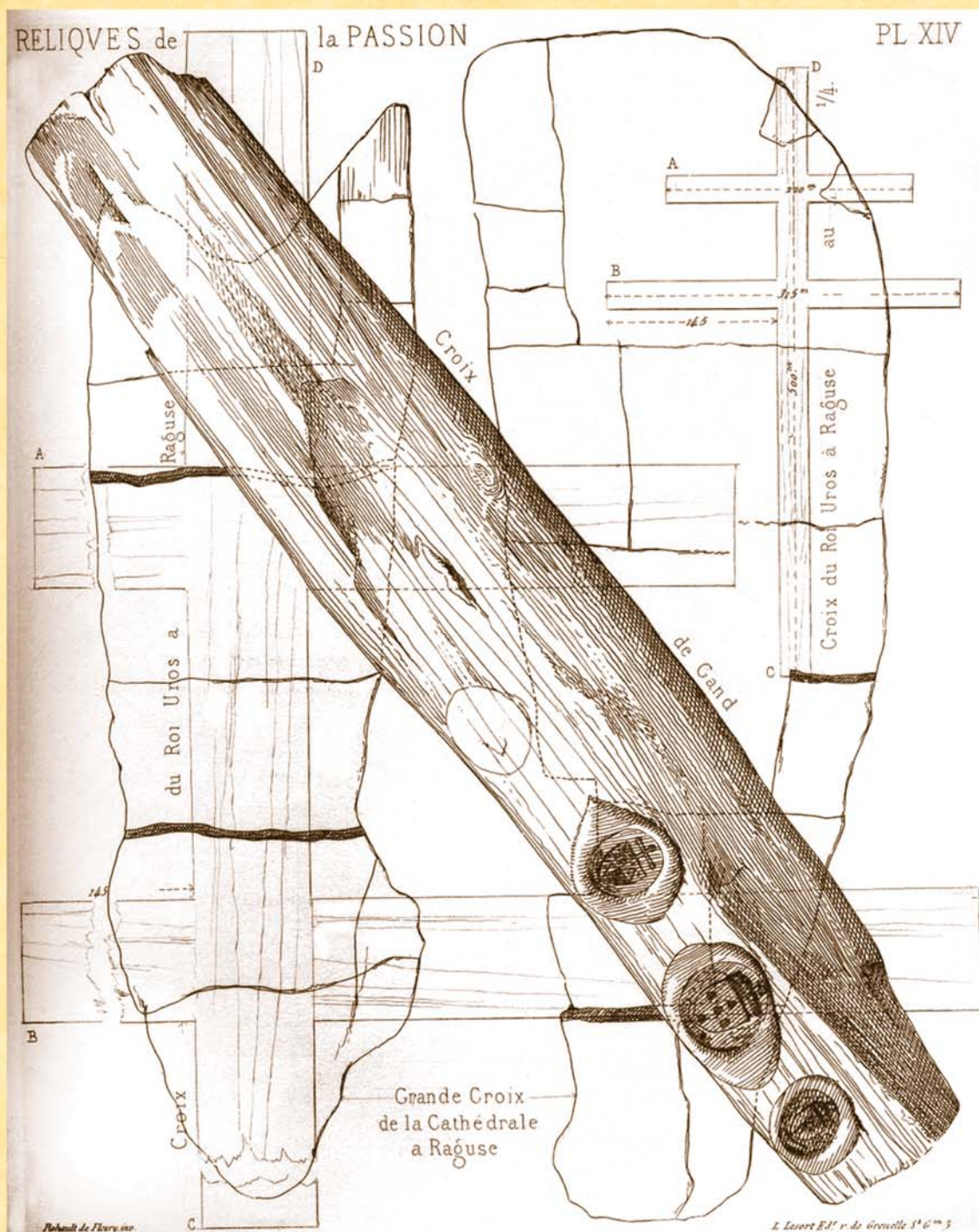
Additional information provided to the French author by another Bishop of Ghent in 1850, recites the provenance, acknowledging its origin from the Tower of London *'in the time of King James I, when holy things were held cheap'*, saying that their diocese received it from *'the residence of the English fathers of the Society of Jesus in Ghent'*. The same source adds that *'an English nobleman, a clerk of the green cloth'* took it to Pudsey, *'his dearest friend'*. In Father Lusher's accompanying written testimony (dated the 16th of September 1645, Ghent) he does not refer to a *'clerk'*, but rather *'a certain nobleman who had office in the Tower of London, whose name was told to me, but now escapes me'*. A lapse of memory or something more deliberate? So, from this we may safely conclude that whoever it was they were styled *'Sir'*, but there were several candidates with that title. Finally, Lusher says that *'this part of the wood was given me twelve years ago'* by Philippa Pudsey, which would date the gift to around 1633, thirteen years after her husband's death. Whether *'the other greater part'*, as Lusher calls it, was still in the Tower when he was writing in 1645 he does not say in his testimony.

The foregoing information from Rohault de Fleury's 19th-century correspondence with the Bishop of Ghent is in stark contrast to the account of the relic given by the Reverend James Bellord in his distinctly more lightweight effort, *The Relics of the True Cross*, published after the French book in 1897. Bellord goes off at a disingenuous tangent when confronted with having to provide a provenance: *'it is part of one brought from the Holy Land by Richard Coeur de Lion. This, according to Gretsch [Jacob Gretser, 1562-1625, Jesuit writer on the history of The Cross], was the one given at the division to the Syrian Christians in Jerusalem'*. Bellord goes on to say that *'it was preserved in the Tower of London till the reign of James II'*.

So, if this quite bizarre claim were true, then it had remained in the Tower from the 12th-century, the time of Richard the Lionheart (1157-1199) to the 1680s when James II was on the throne; albeit for a mere three years. This is incomprehensible and quite implausible, because there is no specific record of its



## RELICS OF THE TRUE CROSS



Another page from Rohault de Fleury's book and we see the Ghent Fragment, running diagonally and bearing three bishops' seals. As is very evident, it has been sliced and hacked about over the centuries. Under nefarious circumstances, it left the Tower of London some time in the early 1600s, going first to the Jesuits' English College in Ghent. It was then moved to the chapel in the palace of the Bishop of Ghent in Belgium, where it remains to this day. This large piece from the Tower of London may once have been part of the Welsh Cross of the royal family of Gwynedd.



presence there during those five hundred years. We could expect to find at least a brief mention somewhere over such a long period of time. Royal audits and inventories of treasured possessions were regularly undertaken throughout the various reigns, and many of the documents survive amongst the public records of England. We can, at the very least, be confident that Edward I's inventories would have included it, not to mention occurrences during the reigns of over twenty other kings and queens since Richard I. We are definitely witnessing a case of provenance fabrication here, more familiar to us in the murky manner of art forgery. Why are we being offered this decidedly dubious provenance – another diversionary tactic?

King Richard I was certainly in the Holy Land in the 1190s, engaged in the none too successful Third Crusade, and on his return he also was shipwrecked, although on this occasion no mention is made of attempts to seek help from a relic of the True Cross. The legend tells us that, disguised as a Knight Templar, Richard had just four attendants with him as he made his way across Europe, only to be captured in 1192 by the Duke of Austria, who handed him over to the Holy Roman Emperor. After a colossal king's ransom was raised and paid, Richard was finally released in 1194 and he headed for home, with – Bellord and sundry relic owners would have us believe – an unusually large fragment of the True Cross stashed in his saddle bag. The promotion of blissful ignorance surrounds the Tower relic's provenance.

This 'evidence' for King Richard having a piece of the True Cross comes from a 13th-century account, formerly attributed to the Anglo-Norman Geoffrey of Vinsauf, but now thought to have been compiled by a London churchman in the 1220s. The text of this seemingly contemporary and often colourful description of Richard I and the Third Crusade, was not commercially published in Britain until 1864. It tells us that King Richard met an abbot in the Holy Land who had hidden the piece of the True Cross, so that it would not fall into enemy hands. Despite being roughly interrogated many times by Saladin himself, we are told, the abbot kept secret the location of the hidden relic. However, the abbot did tell Richard where it was hidden and the king duly collected it, and that is the basis for the 'provenance' of the large object stored in the Tower of London for – we are expected to believe – half a millennium without anyone recording it being there; a very improbable scenario all round.

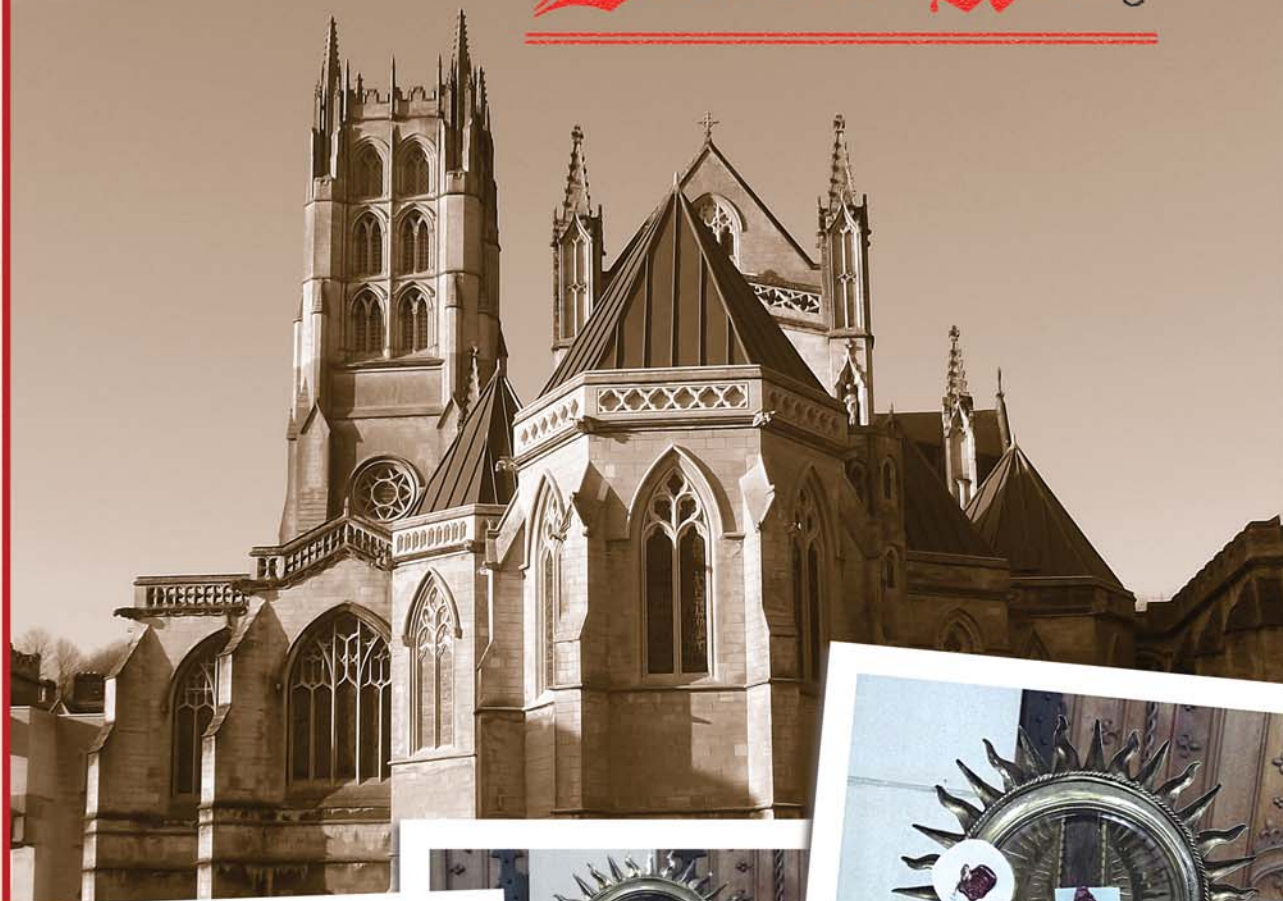
As far as can be deduced, the actual history of the True Cross held at Jerusalem differs considerably from this romanticised view of King Richard's activities in the Holy Land. The relic was captured by Saladin after the defeat of the crusaders at the Battle of Hattin in 1187, and its final appearance was in 1192, when Saladin granted permission to some favoured pilgrims to view the relic, one of these being Hubert Walter (c.1160-1205), the Bishop of Salisbury. Subsequent efforts by a Byzantine emperor and a queen of Georgia to ransom the object were dismissed by Saladin and it disappeared from history. Richard the Lionheart and his fellow crusaders failed to take Jerusalem.

Bellord claims that the piece that was in the Tower of London was divided, with the '*largest piece*' going to the Jesuits in Belgium. This is in direct contradiction to Lusher's testimony, wherein this first-hand witness said the larger piece was returned to the Tower. Evidently, a further '*twenty-one pieces were detached and distributed*' from the Ghent relic, and Rohault de Fleury undertook studious research on the fragments removed, including those between 1707 to 1775. He concluded that originally it measured approximately 11 ins/28cm in length by 3 ins/8cm in width and 2 ins/5cm thick. Assuming it was from the *Welsh Cross*, then after the relic was stripped of its precious materials at Windsor, including the base or foot, the remaining wooden object was indeed large, just as the medieval chroniclers repeatedly emphasised in their works. The French author's measurements, particularly the length, happen to approximate those recorded by Foley for the fragment Pudsey had removed from the whole relic in the Tower, and cutting it lengthways would have rendered the removal less noticeable, than had it been trimmed across its width, thereby shortening its obvious appearance.

When relying on Rohault de Fleury's provenance research, Bellord also refers to the fragment at Downside Abbey in Somerset, which is shown overleaf on page 239. He says that the Alfred piece was presented to the Abbey of Glastonbury by that Wessex king: '*It afterwards came into the possession of Queen*



## Downside Abbey



The Downside Abbey fragment of the True Cross in a monstrance, the design of which reflects the sun symbolism used by the Jesuits, while the back of the artefact bears two seals of authentication. Downside Abbey is of the Benedictine Order, as also was Fort Augustus Abbey in Scotland which closed in the 1990s. Downside Abbey then acquired the Scot's True Cross relic, pictured here on the right as small fragments in another monstrance.



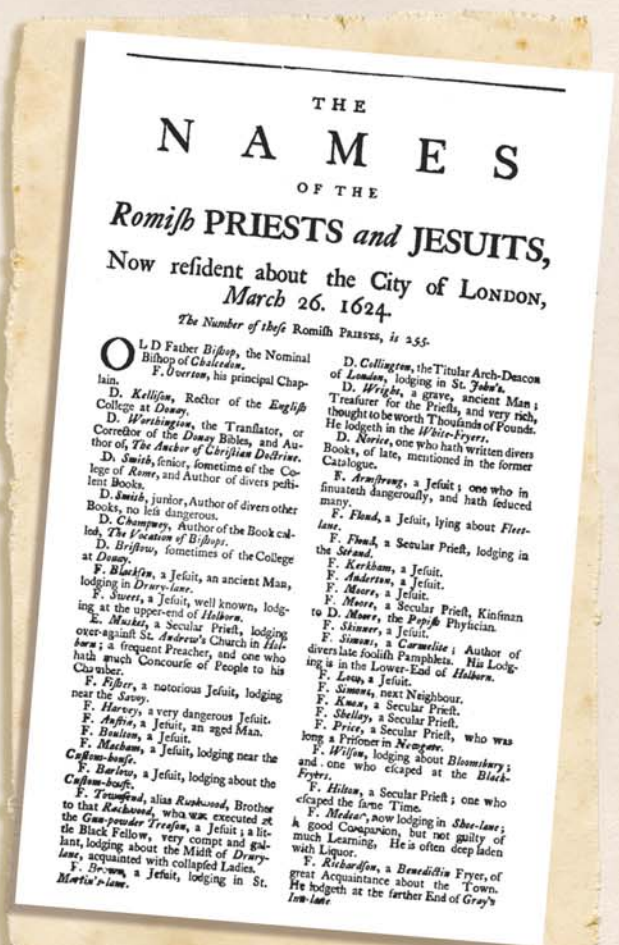
Mary [reigned 1553 to 1558], and then of her chaplain, John Feckenham, last abbot of Westminster'. Around 1549 the staunch Catholic Feckenham was imprisoned in the Tower of London, but he was released from custody when 'Bloody Mary' came to the throne. He was back in the Tower in 1560 in the reign of Elizabeth I and eventually died in prison in 1584.

A possible connection with the Downside relic lies with the previously mentioned fragment acquired by Lady Petre in 1713. That particular one originated in Ghent from the larger fragment held at that time in the Jesuit College, but which is now in the private chapel of the bishop's palace. In the 19th-century William Joseph Petre (13th Baron Petre, born 1847) was deeply involved with Saint Gregory's School at Downside. He made several endowments there, as well as other philanthropic contributions elsewhere in the field of children's education, having initially spent time at the Jesuit establishment of Stonyhurst College in Lancashire.

Several members of the Petre family were Jesuits, including Richard Petre who died in Ghent in 1692, while Charles Petre was arrested in England in November 1688, the year when Catholic King James II fled from the throne. The brother of Charles was Edward Petre, a close companion of King James and a member of his Privy Council, but he too managed to escape persecution by leaving England, as did Charles when he was released from prison. A century earlier life had been no more secure for the Petre family, especially when one of their servants, George Elliot, gave evidence to the Earl of Leicester's inquiries in 1581. Elliot was divulging the names of printers and book-sellers, saying that, 'of the said Jesuit books, for I am sure they sell Papistical books forbidden to be sold'. Describing activities in the Petre household, the servant said that there was much 'going beyond the seas' and 'masses being said'.

So secretive had Catholic activities become that various codes and ciphers were devised for written communications, each signed with a covert name. One member of the Petre family was known as 'Mrs Suffolk'. Robert, the third Lord Petre had founded the Jesuit College of the Holy Apostles in 1633, more simply and covertly known as the 'Suffolk District'. Even Father Lusher had an alias – 'Edward Arrow'. Henry Foley's 19th-century history of the Jesuits in England provides a glimpse of the scale of their appalling persecution, the more fortunate ones being simply deported: 'In March, 1620, he [a Jesuit, 64 year-old Thomas Everard], with about twenty-one other like Jesuits, priests and others, were banished out of the Kingdom, and brought to Dover in the custody of William Waterton and Henry Smith, messengers of his Majesty's Chamber; all confesseth that sithence [since] that time he hath lived at Gant [Ghent]'.

When the Canon of the Diocese of Plymouth, George Oliver, published his study of Catholicism in the West Country in 1857, he had researched local family histories, and writing about one, the Stokers who lived



'Naming and shaming' with the publication of lists like this in 1624 could have only one intention – to incite the mob to hunt down Jesuits in London.

*"There is a piece of old Tyburn, which the Jesuits stole out of England, because it had been honoured by so many of their brethren, which is held in little less esteem than the Holy Cross; for, say they, as the Master died on that, so his disciples died upon this: and these are all set in silver, and richly adorned. For the silver that inshrineth their reliques is both plentiful and massy."*

FROM J. Morgan's *Phoenix Britannicus*, volume I, 1732.



## A C A T A L O G U E

Of such *Papish* Physicians in and about the City of London, as the Author either knoweth, or by good Information heareth of.

**D. Moore**, a Man much employed, and infamously with great Persecution in our State. His Abode is in St. Bridget, at Mr. Litch the Apothecary.

**D. Cademan**: A fair-conditioned Man, sometime of Trinity College, in Cambridge.

**D. Flood**: Not he of the College of that Name, but one who liveth in Fleet-street.

**D. Lodge**, dwelling on Lambert-Hill.

**D. Berry**, in Fleet-street, against Water-lane.

**D. Baldwin**, in Hill-street.

**D. Price**, in Chancery-lane, one who lived many Years in Rome.

**D. Hawkins**, in Charter-house-Court.

**D. Webb**, in the Old-Baily. He pretends to teach a New Way to learn Languages, and by this Occasion may inveigle Disciples.

**D. Gifford**, dwelling without Ludgate, in the little Alley.

**D. Hinchelore**, without Temple-Bar.

**D. Eglington**, a Seaman, in Noble-street.

**M. Pragon**, in Silver-street, a Canon.

**D. Fryer**, Sen. Nomine *de re frater-nalis*.

**D. Fryer**, Jun. He agreeth with his Brother in *Papery*; though in other Respects they differ.

**D. Edward**, lately come to Practice in this City.

**D. Japuntis**, an Italian.

**M. Lonsdale**, a Mountebank, lodging without Temple-Bar.

**M. Coveris**, an Emperick Man, in Holborn.

**M. Sharpley**, such another.

**M. Dice**, who faith he is a Doctor.

*Vix credo*. Yet a little Learning might serve, if he had his Proceedings from *Padua*.

**Monfieur**, a French Doctor, lurking about the Strand: He sometimes goes to hear a Mass near the Swaney.

Whether these, or any of them be allowed by the Approbation and Authority of the College of Physicians, I know not. But sure it is, that those who take their Degrees Publicly in *Papish* Universities, beyond the Seas, do take a solemn Oath of Obedience to the Pope. And it is vehemently suspected, that some of these have a private Faculty and Power from the See of Rome, to exercise the Authority of *Romish* Priests, in reconciling and absolving their Patients, in *artificial* morbis, upon Point of Death or great Danger.

Besides these, there are other Physicians, not undisputed. And there are divers Surgeons and Apothecaries known to be *Respectors*. Of whom Notice may be taken.

*Bacon,  
Hickes,  
Bridget,  
Hew, Hughes*

A 'Hit List' of London's Catholic doctors from the 17th-century.

FROM Morgan's *Phoenix Britannicus*, volume I, 1732.

very close to Downside, he recorded the following: 'At the plunder of Glastonbury he [the Jesuit, Augustine Stoker] secured one of the nails, twelve inches long (with its case), which had been used at Christ's crucifixion'. Oliver goes on to mention another relic from the crucifixion, a piece from the Crown of Thorns, as well as 'the piece of the true cross', commenting that both 'are now at Downside'. In his article Morris mentions that the Bishop of Ghent also acquired a piece of the Crown of Thorns in 1808.

So this could be the origin of the relic at Downside Abbey, complete with a connection to Glastonbury Abbey and the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s. As to the links with King Alfred and King Richard, the provenance is hazy to say the least, and it all depends on the background to the Glastonbury collection, which held 'a multitude of reliques', comprising 'two small peeces of his [Jesus] cradle; some of the gold which the Wisemen offered when they came to adore him; some peeces of the bread of those five loaves, with which Jesus fed 5000 men; some of our Lord's hair; one thorn of the Crown of Thornes; some peeces of his cross'.<sup>20</sup> According to Dom Bede Camm, the Benedictine author of *Forgotten Shrines* published in 1912, there are several relics at Downside, including those from the persecution of Catholic 'martyrs'.

In his 1882 article John Morris confirms that the Petre relic was taken – 'in former times' – from the Ghent fragment, along with one in the possession of the Plowden family of Shropshire. Like the Petre family, the Plowdens were subjected to persecution because of their Catholic faith. Henry Foley records how Roger de Plowden was captured in 1191 during the Third Crusade, in which King Richard I participated. Plowden swore that if he survived he would express his gratitude in a tangible form and, eventually having returned to England he erected a chapel at Lydbury Church in Shropshire. Edmund Plowden, who died in 1584 was offered high office if he would relinquish his Catholic faith, but he declined the honour. His second son, Francis, was Comptroller of the Household during the brief reign of James II. Other members of the Plowden family were Jesuits in Ghent, notably Percy Plowden, who, according to Morris, sought approval of a relic of the True Cross from the Bishop of Ghent, Jan-Baptist de Smet in October 1737. It was Charles Plowden who tutored Thomas Weld and both contributed to Stonyhurst's growth. In 1803 Weld donated a relic from the Crown of Thorns to the Lancashire college, and the reliquary inscription says that it had once belonged to Mary Queen of Scots (1542-1587). It was recorded as being at the Jesuit college of St. Omers in 1665, before arriving back in England in the late 1700s.

Were there any notably large relics of the True Cross in Ghent prior to the beginning of the 1600s? That was around the time when the large wooden object in a sack seems to have mysteriously disappeared from the Tower of London. And also when the Drahtmal Cross puts in an appearance in Brussels. Morris records that portions of the Ghent fragment were being distributed in the 1660s, although this must also have happened earlier but remained unrecorded for an obvious reason – it was purloined from London. One earlier example is of a 15th-century Duke of Burgundy, assuming the countship of Flanders during a ceremony that involved kissing a piece of the Holy Cross. That took place at a church in Ghent dedicated to Saint John, following the celebration of a mass at Saint Peter's Abbey, a Flemish Benedictine monastery.

From around the time the large relic was possibly still in the possession of England's monarchs and stored in the Tower, there is a story associated with Queen Henrietta Maria (1609-1669), who was the consort of Charles I (1600-1649). His beheading led to the regnal interlude taken up by the Commonwealth of Parliament and its military enforcer, Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658). Cromwell held the reigns of power



## The Divine Right of Kings



ILLUSTRATION Mantley's History of the Rebellions, 1691.

*Alij diutius Imperium tenuerunt, nemo fortiter reliquit. Tacit. Histor. Lib. 2. c. 4*

King Charles I clutches the Crown of Thorns, while his own crown slips from the globe, the symbol of a monarch's dominion that is expressed in the orb used in royal regalia. This king led Britain into the Civil War.



Re-enactment groups stage scenes from the Civil War that tore Britain apart in the 1600s.







ILLUSTRATION *Histoire de L'Entree de la Reyne Mere etc.*, 1639.

### *A Queen's Cross Channel Miracle*

The wife of Charles I, Henrietta Maria (right) was the sister of King Louis XIII of France. While she was crossing the English Channel, a great storm demanded a miracle from the True Cross relic on board. Her actions echoed a similar incident, when the relic's finder, Saint Helen, used items from the crucifixion to calm the waves (far right).



COLLECTION  
Warwick Castle (portrait detail).



ILLUSTRATION  
*Regia Via Crucis*, 1635.

from 1649 to 1658, having been previously occupied with the English Civil War, an event that tore Britain apart as Royalists and Parliamentarians fought for control of a shattered realm. The sectarian struggles between Protestants and Catholics continued to add to the discord that followed the execution of King Charles, who maintained his belief in the 'Divine Right of Kings' as he mounted the scaffold. Queen Henrietta Maria was both French and a devout Catholic, a position that meant she never had a coronation, and it also made her distinctly unpopular in England, especially so following her husband's demise on the chopping block in London.

Her treasurer was Sir Richard Wynn (1588-1649) of the Gwydir dynasty in North Wales, the family who owned the estate that included Dolwyddelan. Sir Richard did not place his considerable resources at the disposal of King Charles I, during those turbulent times of Cavaliers and Roundheads, and he managed to hold on to his seat in Parliament. He was, however, eventually purged out by Cromwell's New Model Army, which in 1648 had barred admission to Parliament of those who were not on the approved list. Within months the baronet was dead, his legacy being the beautiful Gwydir Chapel in Llanrwst, where, it is claimed, the sarcophagus of Llywelyn the Great lies to this day. Another Welshman, Robert Pugh, was Henrietta Maria's confessor and the story of his later years, during the persecution of recusants (individuals refusing to participate in Anglican services) is one of seemingly endless capture and escape.

Henrietta Maria was sailing to France in 1643 when a fragment of the True Cross made an appearance in her possession. A ferocious storm was raging during the voyage across the English Channel and the ships were in great peril. So much so, that the queen and crew frantically prayed and she cast the relic on the waves in the hope of taming the tempest and avoiding a great loss of life; or at least that is the legend. There is a less dramatic and more credible version in the account by Morris: '*several ships foundered, among others that which had on board her Majesty's chapel, in which there was a fine piece of the true Cross*'. Morris adds that according to another, unspecified account the relic in the queen's possession was '*only a part of it, the rest remaining in the Tower*'. Although often conflicting, the accumulated evidence would suggest that the larger piece in the Tower disappeared during the reign of James I, who died in 1625.

It would appear that Henrietta Maria's piece of the relic had been lost at sea, but then we are told that it was miraculously recovered by members of the Catholic Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, this being asserted in a letter from 1672, when a Richard Jesser claimed to have had a portion from this 'drowned' fragment. All rather baffling, but such is the nature of the miraculous. The likelihood is that Henrietta Maria's relic was originally sliced from the large piece in the Tower, or at least what remained of it. This fantastic yarn of a queen and a storm may have been concocted – or at least exaggerated – to account for the relic ending up on mainland Europe, perhaps in an effort to cover up any tracks left by the Jesuits operating from Ghent.



The 1640s not only saw the relic of the True Cross being buffeted by waves but also yet another storm being unleashed upon the Dean and Chapter of the College of Saint George in Windsor. The erstwhile home of the *Welsh Cross* was yet again to suffer at the hands of the state, this time under the Cromwellian regime, as recorded by an 18th-century writer: *'In the year 1642, the Ornaments and Vessels belonging to this Chapel, and appropriated to the use of the Altar, amounting to 3580 ounces of wrought Plate of the most curious workmanship, were seized under colour of Parliamentary Authority, by Captain Fogg, on a general Plunder of this Royal Foundation'*. Barely a century had gone by since the Windsor chapel was last looted of its treasures, including the *Welsh Cross*, but things improved in 1660: *'This Sacrilege was in some measure made up to the College on the Restoration, by the bounty and good pleasure of the Sovereign [Charles II] and Knights Companions [of the Garter], who contributed cheerfully to supply the Altar with all things necessary to its descent service and ornament'*.<sup>21</sup> However, the resurrection of the Chapel of Saint George was to be short lived. By the 1780s it was suffering the effects of severe neglect once more, as mentioned by a visitor named Francis Pigott who toured the building, describing it as *'an elegant and neglected Gothic chapel, perhaps the first in the world for beauty and splendour, but dirty, and disregarded to such a degree as to become a nuisance to the eye'*.<sup>22</sup>



Committee for the Demolition of Monuments of Superstition and Idolatry ~ English Parliament, 17th-century.

### State Sponsored Iconoclasm

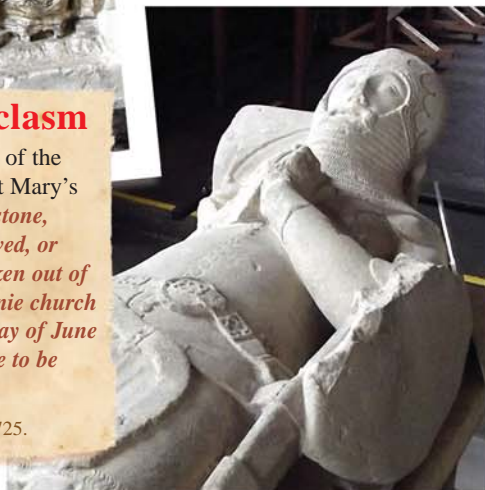
The Act of 1550 sounded the beginning of the end for tomb effigies, like these in Saint Mary's Church, Abergavenny: *'Anie images of stone, timber, alabaster or earth, graven or carved, or painted, which heretofore have beene taken out of anie church or chapell, or yet stand in anie church or chapell, and doo not, before the last day of June next isuing, deface and destroye, or cause to be defaced and destroyed the same images.'*

FROM Hearne's *Peter Langtoft's Chronicle*, 1725.

ILLUSTRATION Hind's Wenceslaus Hollar, 1922.



When Edward I erected twelve monuments to the memory of his beloved Queen Eleanor, little could he have imagined their state-ordered destruction centuries later.





Returning to the 17th-century, we again encounter the piece of the True Cross in the Tower of London, the evidence being in a letter from Father Lusher, also published in the journal of the Essex Recusant Society. The letter is dated 1647 when Lusher was in Ghent, and he writes that he recalled seeing the remainder of the relic at the London home of John Tradescant (c.1570s-1638), gardener to Queen Elizabeth and the Stuarts, including entering the service of Queen Henrietta Maria some time after 1628. His son was also John (1608-1662) and a royally-appointed gardener. The Tradescant family were well-travelled collectors of plants and seeds, working for several members of the aristocracy, including the Duke of Buckingham, a court favourite of Charles I.

As well as botany the Tradescants displayed the classic enthusiasm of the Age of Antiquaries, collecting what were termed ‘curiosities and rarities’. Few gentlemen’s homes were without a ‘Cabinet of Curiosities’, as the item of furniture was known at the time, usually an ornate cupboard with many drawers for storage and display, as illustrated opposite on page 246. The Tradescant house in Lambeth, South London (pictured below) was bursting with curiosities. Their collection of curious items grew to be so large, particularly as a result of foreign travel and royal patronage, that the house itself came to be known as ‘Tradescant’s Ark’, and it became Britain’s first privately-owned museum open to the public; at least for those who could afford to pay to get in.

In amongst a quite bizarre array of oddities of one form or another was a fragment of the True Cross, and Father Lusher says in his letter of 1647 that he saw it in Tradescant’s house, *‘amongst his rarities in which he was curious and had asked of king James [the first] this piece as a reward for some service’*. Lusher confirms that this was the fragment – at least what was left of it – that remained in the Tower of London after the Pudsey incident, and he even made a comparison with the off-cut that he possessed to confirm it was the larger piece from which his portion came. The Jesuit priest also noted that the remaining piece from the Tower *‘had on every side been cleaved off’*. Obviously, many bits had been cut off and distributed while it had been in the Tower. As Lusher was told by Tradescant at the time, the king had specified that while it was in the Lambeth collection no more portions were to be removed from it. A further stipulation was that upon the king’s death it should be returned to the Tower of London and its royal collection.

The elder Tradescant died in April 1638, and in July of that year a German writer and traveller named Georg Christoph Stirn wrote about the Lambeth collection, noting amongst the assortment of curiosities the hand of a mermaid, stuffed birds, an elk’s hoof, precious stones, assorted coins and even an instrument used for circumcision by Jews. The collection was also richly endowed with royal memorabilia, thanks to the Tradescants’ popularity at court, achieved through their knowledge and skills devoted to the royal gardens, as well as services rendered to members of the nobility of England. For example, in 1635 a royal warrant had been issued by Charles I to the Keeper of the Hampton Court Wardrobe to deliver Henry VIII’s cap and Henry



**John Tradescant the Elder**  
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



The house in Lambeth where the Tradescant family lived and built up their famous collection of curiosities.

ILLUSTRATION  
Walford’s *Old and New London*, 1878.



**John Tradescant the Younger**  
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



VII's gloves to John Tradescant, each item being destined for display in the collection at Lambeth. Stirn also wrote that amongst the strangely assorted artefacts was '*a small piece of wood from the cross of Christ*'.<sup>23</sup>

Had the relic not been returned to the Tower? The late King James's instructions were quite specific, but Charles I was on the throne in 1638 and had been since 1625. Father Lusher seemed quite certain that it was the larger portion of the relic, when he examined it in Tradescant's house, so Stirn's use of the word '*small*' is rather puzzling. We know from several sources that the *Welsh Cross* fragment was said to be large, so we can only conclude that someone had '*cleeved off*' a portion of the larger relic prior to it being returned to the royal household, and it was that small off-cut which Stirn saw on his visit to Lambeth. Perhaps whoever it was thought that, since King James was dead no one may notice another sliver had been removed from what was already a misshapen chunk of wood; as illustrated on page 237.

In 1634 Pope Urban VIII sent his Papal Nuncio, Gregorio Panzani to England, the brief being to try and heal the schisms within the Catholic community. It is in the memoirs of Panzani that we find an intriguing mention of the royal relic. He writes about the object having '*been found in the Tower of London, where it had lain concealed many years*'. Panzani is obviously referring to the Tradescants when he mentions '*the king's servants*', saying that they '*took care to have it placed in a kind of open box, on which some pains were bestowed in the workmanship*'. This open box suggests a well-made display cabinet, or perhaps a draw from a cabinet of curiosities in the Lambeth collection. Panzani says that the Tradescants' '*design was to have it exposed among other rarities*', although he wonders about its display there, thinking it should have been in a royal palace, demonstrating that he knew it to have been the monarch's property. What is especially striking about the Panzani account is his description of the relic as being '*a small piece of the cross*'. This echoes Stirn's observation on this particular relic's small size, so it was evidently an off-cut of the larger piece, presumably retained by the Tradescants, although there is no further record to confirm this – inevitably given the circumstances.

The Lambeth collection was now in the care of the younger John Tradescant and his wife Hester. Father Lusher, writing in 1647, stated that the large piece had been returned to the Tower, but does not say when that took place. If it was returned by agreement upon King James's death, then it was done so sometime around 1625. It was not listed in the Tradescant catalogue of 1656. As further evidence of its departure from the Tradescant collection, the object does not appear amongst the items which the antiquary Elias Ashmole (1617-1692) acquired from the Lambeth museum in the 1670s. It was around then that Ashmole's friend, Izaak Walton (c.1593-1683) saw the collection, and he mentions it in his best-seller, *The Complete Angler*, first published in 1653. However, there is no reference to the relic in Walton's



**The Cabinet of Curiosities was a piece of furniture treasured by antiquaries, who stored their collections of 'rarities' in these often ornate and expensive items.**

COLLECTIONS (top and centre) Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, Merseyside.  
Amber cabinet – Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.



book. Ashmole eventually donated the Tradescant collection, along with his own accumulated rarities, to form the nucleus of what became Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, the first building of which was erected between 1678 and 1683.

Ashmole had helped catalogue the Tradescant collection in the 1650s, before ultimately acquiring it all in rather murky circumstances. Elias Ashmole was an avaricious collector, including several attempts at acquiring rich widows. His second wife came with a sufficient fortune to enable him to devote his time to study. That it was a disastrous marriage is evidenced by the fact that she tried to get rid of him in 1657, filing some eight hundred folios of complaints against Ashmole to account for the unhappy partnership. His wife died in 1668 and soon afterwards Ashmole married the daughter of Sir William Dugdale (1605-1686), the eminent antiquary with a passion for medieval studies who had a very considerable influence in the antiquarian world.

Elias Ashmole was also a keen astrologer, but seemingly unsuccessful with alchemy (Hermetic Philosophy), which, like his younger contemporary Isaac Newton (1643-1727), he studied in depth, even publishing on the subject, unlike Newton, whose alchemical experiments were more covert. At this time alchemy was rapidly evolving into the science of chemistry, just as astrology was spawning astronomy. The so-called 'Age of Reason' was dawning over Britain and Europe, cultivating the cult of intellectual objectivity that left little room for the medieval mind-set, with its acceptance of subjectivity as being inherently valid. The papal declaration that scientific curiosity amounted to 'heresy' could no longer stand in the way of a forceful reformation of socio-cultural values, as the 'old religion' gave way to a less inflexible interpretation of Christianity. Inquiry eventually disposed of The Inquisition.

Whether in art or architecture the classical world of Greece and Rome came to embody the free-thinking spirit of the age, with cities adopting design styles more suited to ancient Athens than London and industrialising Britain. From town halls to town houses, classical columns and porticoes met with popular taste, sometimes carried to extravagant extremes in the statues and monuments of the great and the good. Sculptures – like the example illustrated opposite on page 248 – began to portray aristocrats clad in full Roman outfits. It began to not only reflect the prevailing cultural taste but also the contemporary world-view, shaped by the rapidly growing British Empire. It modelled itself on its Latin predecessor's conceit of conferring a civilising influence on its colonial possessions and their populace, while engaging in a level of exploitation which far outstripped that of the Roman Empire. As one English writer pronounced in all seriousness in 1773, *'the Grecian and Roman writers are allowed to be the only standards of historical truth'*.<sup>24</sup> Romano-centricity was reaching its zenith.

A man of his times, Elias Ashmole was closely involved with the College of Saint George at Windsor, and

### Alchemy transmutes into Chemistry

*'The Age  
of  
Reason'*



Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* was published in 1652 and consisted of a valuable collection of twenty-nine English alchemical writings, including several 15th-century works.

Isaac Newton's notebook records that he purchased the book in 1669, and his copy is annotated in Newton's own handwriting.

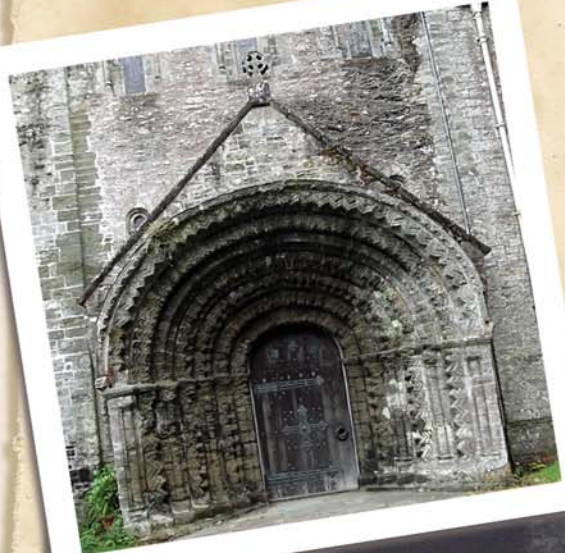


he wrote a comprehensive book on the history of the Order of the Garter (published in 1672), although he appears not to have returned irreplaceable medieval documents, loaned to him by the Dean to assist with research: *'they were among the manuscripts which he [Ashmole] left to the University of Oxford at his death in 1692'*.<sup>25</sup> Ashmole's approach to scholarly activities seems to have been somewhat suspect. He began cataloguing Roman coins in Oxford in 1658, several items having been donated by the antiquary and writer John Aubrey (1626-1697). In his *Memoir of John Aubrey* (published in 1845), another antiquary, John Britton (1771-1857) reflected on the fact that not all of the coins donated by Aubrey could be later traced in the Oxford collection.

Elias Ashmole's acquisition of the Tradescant collection was something of a scandal at the time, since the widow of the younger Tradescant, who had died in 1662, insisted that the deed of gift was signed in 1659 by her late husband while he was drunk and unaware of what he was committing to by his action. He had assigned the collection to Ashmole for a mere shilling. A month after his friend died, Ashmole lodged his legal claim in court and eventually won his case, and the widow was to hold the extremely valuable collection in trust until she died. Some years later, Hester Tradescant, the widow, was found dead in the garden pond at the house in Lambeth; Ashmole was living next door at the time. It was all rather suspicious, but no one claimed – although they probably gossiped – that Ashmole was indirectly responsible for her death. Ashmole's diary, which he closely edited before publication, somewhat indifferently notes, *'my wife told me, that Mrs. Tradescant was found drowned'*.

## THE ROMAN MODEL

Beyond the impressive doorway of the late Norman Saint German's Priory Church in Cornwall, lies the extravagant tomb of Edward Eliot, who died in 1722. The Eliot family went on to become barons and earls of Saint Germans, and like their contemporaries, they saw the 'Roman Model' as the ideal for sepulchral monuments, the one here being the work of Rysbrack (1694-1770), a successful Flemish-born exponent of Neoclassicism.



### *The Legacy of Ashmole and the Tradescants ~ The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.*



Illustrations of the Ashmolean Museum after its foundation in the 17th-century.



Elias Ashmole with his book on the Order of the Garter. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



FROM *Catalogue of the Ashmolean Museum*, 1836.



That was the entry for the 4th of April 1678 and a couple of weeks later he noted, '*I removed the pictures from Mrs. Tradescant's house to mine*'.<sup>26</sup> He had previously removed some '*rarities*' with, according to his diary, Hester Tradescant's permission. Just sixteen days after Hester's funeral, Ashmole took over the lease of the Tradescant property.

The Ashmole incident had clearly taken its toll on Hester Tradescant, prompting one writer to observe that Ashmole '*appears all through life to have had a keen eye for what is vulgarly denominated the main chance, and, moreover, to have been of a very litigious disposition*'.<sup>27</sup> Fearing further legal encounters with Ashmole, the obviously distraught widow had made a submission before a justice of the peace and witnesses in 1676, as reported by the same writer. Mrs Tradescant stated that she had '*rashly and unadvisedly spoken false and scandalous words and reports against Ashmole*'. Elias Ashmole was now a rich and powerful individual, with considerable influence at court, both the law courts and the courtly chambers of the king.

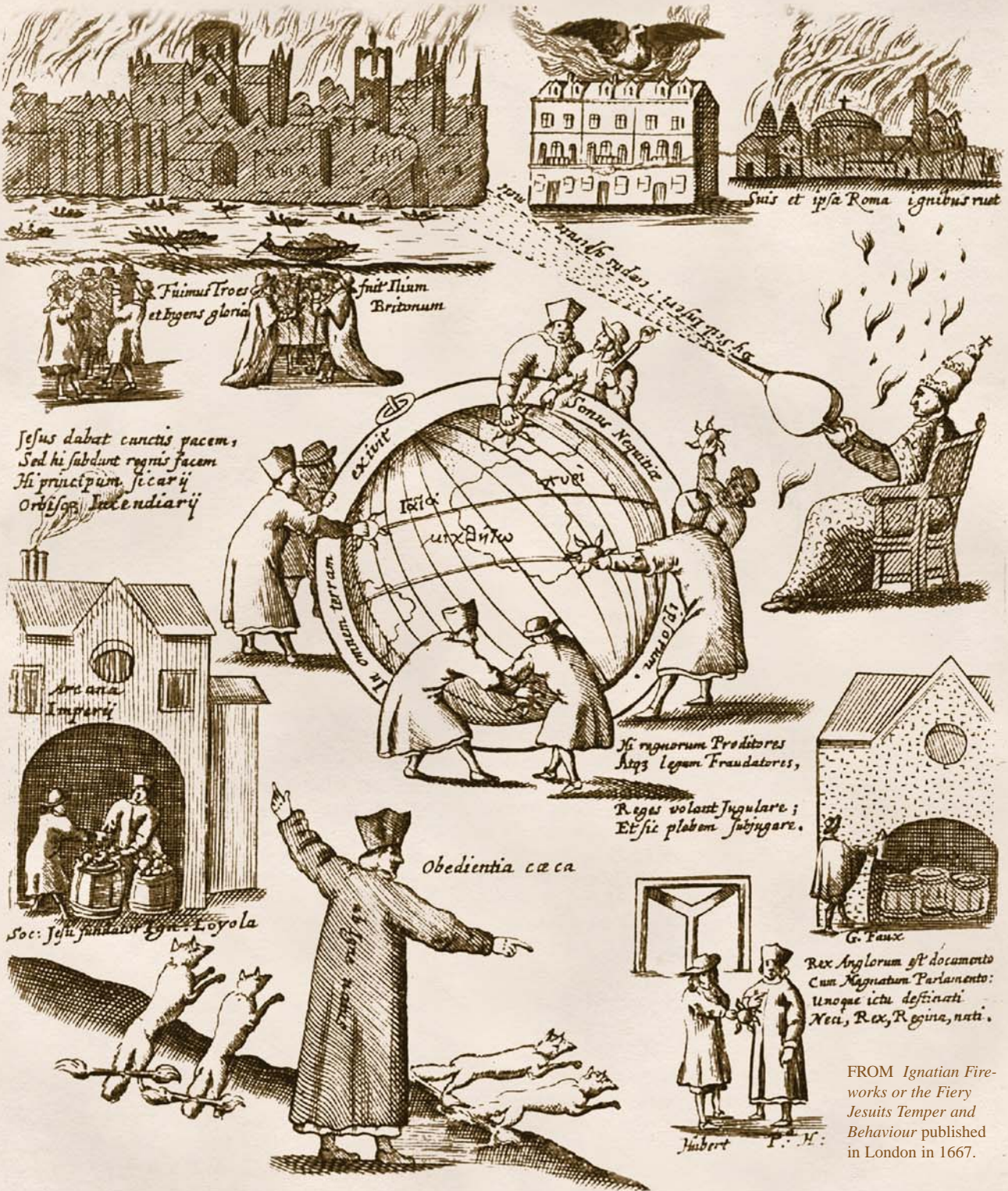
From the same era arises a curious episode involving King James II (1633-1701) and a piece of the True Cross. The diary of the antiquary Ralph Thoresby (1658-1725) mentions how at the coronation of James II in Westminster Abbey, June 1685, '*the fall of a pole*' hit and damaged the tomb of Edward the Confessor. A hole was spotted in the coffin and a chorister, Henry Keepe (alias Charles Taylour) cautiously squeezed his hand inside, having spotted something glinting in the dim light around the shrine. He pulled out a gold chain to which was attached a small enamelled cross with jewels, containing also a piece of the True Cross. Thoresby noted in his diary on a Sunday: '*At Church; then walked to Bloomsbury, to Mr. Wotton's, who showed me several curiosities, and gave me some, particularly a small shred of the silk shroud of King Edward the Confessor, cut off when the coffin was accidentally broke*'.<sup>28</sup> No doubt the fabric relic ended up in Thoresby's cabinet of curiosities, along with his impressive collection of coins, medals and other rarities.

When it was found the enamelled cross relic was handed over to the Dean of Westminster Abbey and was subsequently given to King James II, who rewarded Henry Keepe with a £50 bounty. Remarking on the efficacy of such a relic to another diarist, John Evelyn (1620-1706), the king recalled the Westminster discovery and Evelyn recorded the conversation: '*Afterwards his Majesty spoke of some relics that had effected strange cures, particularly a piece of our blessed Saviour's cross*'. The bishop of Bath and Wells was also present at the time, and Evelyn continued: '*his Majesty began to put the Bishop in mind how earnestly the late King (his brother) called upon him during his agony, to take out what he had in his pocket. I had thought, said the King, it had been some keys, which might lead to some cabinet that his Majesty would have me secure; but, says he, you well remember that I found nothing in any of his pockets but a cross of gold [...] within was encased a little fragment, as was thought, of the true cross*'.<sup>29</sup>

It is possible that this particular cross relic was not actually placed with Edward the Confessor at the time of his death in 1066, but added later during the body's translation at the abbey, perhaps in 1269 at the behest of Henry III. Some thirty-six years after Edward's death the stone lid of his sarcophagus was removed in the presence of Westminster's Norman abbot, Gilbert Crispin, and at this event in 1102 they discovered '*the finger with its royal ring, the sceptre at his side, the crown upon his head, all the regal ornaments of his noble burial*'. No particular mention of a True Cross piece of jewellery. Also present at the event was Gundulf, the Bishop of Rochester, who was admonished by Abbot Crispin for attempting to remove hair from the Confessor's long '*snowy beard, to keep it with solemn reverence in his memory as a treasure more precious than gold*'.<sup>30</sup>

During the late 1600s the struggles between Catholics and Protestants continued to be an inferno of hatred blazing across Britain, and the Jesuits remained targets during the reign of Charles II from 1660-1685. Illustrations like those pictured opposite on page 250 show images of the pope using bellows to fan the flames of London burning in the Great Fire of 1666, while in the lower right area we see Guy Fawkes stacking barrels of gunpowder, so as to accomplish his devilish deed against the king and Parliament. Such propaganda simply increased hatred against those '*Fiery Jesuits*' who were perceived as enemies of the state, along with Catholics in general. In 1674 the king issued a proclamation granting a reward of £5 to anyone





FROM *Ignatian Fireworks or the Fiery Jesuits Temper and Behaviour* published in London in 1667.

apprehending a Catholic priest, an act that would not have gone down too well with his wife, the devout Catholic Catherine of Braganza. Like King Charles' mother, Henrietta Maria, Catherine was unpopular within the realm because of her faith. Charles' successor in the Stuart dynasty was James II, who was crowned in 1685, but by 1688 his position on the throne became untenable. He had converted to Roman Catholicism in the 1660s, but did not broadcast the fact for fear of the inevitable response. As king he continued to attend Anglican services until 1676, also associating mainly with Protestants at court, although his queen and second wife, Mary of Modena was well-known to be a devout Catholic. The king refused to toe the parliamentary line and his religious status became public knowledge, eventually fuelling further sectarian violence in this inflammable period. It led to what is described as the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688.



King James went on the run, hoping to flee to France, where he had spent many years before ascending the throne, and also where he had converted to Catholicism. He got as far as Faversham in Kent, intending to sail to the protection of his cousin, King Louis, but he was molested by a bunch of local people, who at first thought he might be a fleeing Jesuit. In the commotion James was robbed of his precious True Cross relic, said to be the cross that had been found in the tomb of Edward the Confessor,<sup>31</sup> although this is not known for certain. Be that as it may, James was mortified to lose the sacred object, which, we are told, the ruffians simply wanted for its gold and precious stones. Now recognised for who he was, the king *'screamed for a boat! a boat! that he might escape. When he was conducted by Lord Winchelsea from the public house to a private house in the town, he fell weeping, and deplored his great misfortune in losing a piece of the wood of the true cross'*.<sup>32</sup> He had also lost the throne of England – just cause to weep indeed.

James died in 1701 while exiled in France, where he was entombed with much pomp and ceremony, and his body parts even became collectable relics, as described in Weldon's *History of the Benedictines* in England (1881): *'part of the flesh taken from his body when it was embalmed and of his bowels or entrails (of which the Jesuits of St. Omer's had the rest) are interred in the parish church of St. Germain's en Lay'*. The Jesuit College of St. Omer in Flanders subsequently evolved into Stonyhurst College in Lancashire.

It now seems circumstantially evident that the larger piece of the True Cross that remained in the Tower of London, after Thomas Pudsey and others acquired a slice of it, also disappeared in the 17th-century. The Jesuit historian Henry Foley mentions that the Pudsey family had familial connections with the English Jesuit College at Douai. This college was established in 1561 and Foley quotes from the Douai archives when mentioning that a William Pudsey arrived there in 1576, the year in which this William's father had died in York Castle after *'a very long imprisonment for the Catholic faith'*. The Douai records also mention a Stephen Pudsey being present there in 1640. This evidence shows that a thriving, albeit secretive channel of communication was in place at the time the Tower relic finally left England. The motives of its 'rescuers' were simply to save the precious object from the fires of the maddened mob.

James Bellord summed things up quite neatly when writing the introduction to his booklet on relics of the True Cross, although he did not tell the 'whole truth and nothing but' in his booklet of 1897, published by the Catholic Truth Society: *'True Protestantism has always held the Cross of Christ in unholy horror, recognising instinctively that the emblem of salvation is peculiarly the emblem of the Catholic Church'*. And yet a large piece of the True Cross had been stored with the Crown Jewels in Protestant England, clear evidence of its historic value to the generations of monarchs since the 1280s. Only the *Welsh Cross* enjoyed that unique status, as has been evinced in the chapters of this book. No longer a glittering treasure and reduced to a *'stumpe'* in a sack, the Croes Naid's significance to royalty remained clear, even among those who may have regarded such things with *'unholy horror'*, as Bellord phrased it.

Yet another piece of the Ghent relic was removed in 2009 and this time it travelled to Ireland, a gift from the Diocese of Ghent that was collected from there by Canon Jim Carroll. Father Carroll was in the Belgian city for a commemorative event to celebrate the ordination in Ghent of Oliver Plunkett (1625-1681), the Irish archbishop who established a Jesuit College in the town of Drogheda in 1670. When the relic of the True Cross – described by the local newspaper as *'two very tiny slivers of wood, no bigger than splinters'*<sup>33</sup> – was presented in 2009, it was accompanied as usual with a certificate of authenticity. The gift was made by the Bishop of Ghent, Lucas van Looy, but the information on the relic had been prepared by Bishop Hendrik-Frans Bracq in November 1867, simply stating that, *'the relics should be set out for public veneration but not however lifted up'*. As to the Tower of London heritage of the Ghent relic, no information is revealed, merely that Bishop Bracq, *'having observed as prescribed by the Council of Trent [Trento, Italy between 1545 and 1563], duly recognise and approve certain relics of the wood of the Holy Cross'*. Bishop Bracq arranged for the remaining large fragment to be placed in a reliquary formed by a glass cylinder. One end of this was sealed with a gilt metal terminal bearing the insignia of three bishops of Ghent, plus that of the Irish archbishop of Tuam. The other end bears a simple inscription: *'a peece of the stumpe of the Crosse of our Saviour'*.





## A Catholic Confession 1702

*'This part of the Cross was brought to the College of the English Jesuits in Ghent by that father who got it immediately from the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London.'*

James Lynch (1626-1713)  
Archbishop of Tuam, Ireland.



This connection between Ireland and the Ghent Fragment dates to the 17th-century, when James Lynch, the Archbishop of Tuam in Galway, was in exile in the Belgian city, where he had previously been consecrated in 1669. In his article on the relic from the Tower of London, John Morris says that the Irish archbishop *'rehearses minutely the history of the relic'*. Morris appears to be referring to a letter from Lynch, dated the 2nd of July 1702, written in Latin but translated into English when published in the journal of the Essex Recusant Society in 1971. The letter provides a damning indictment of the relic's unlawful removal by Jesuits: *'This part of the Cross was brought to the College of the English Jesuits in Ghent by that father who got it immediately from the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London'*. In saying simply *'that father'* the archbishop is either being deliberately evasive, given that it was stolen from the Crown, or he genuinely did not know the name of the Jesuit priest who took it. Is he referring to Father Lusher and his off-cut from the larger fragment? This seems unlikely since Lusher's piece was not acquired *'immediately from the Crown Jewels in the Tower'*, but rather from a member of the Pudsey family. Lynch may, therefore, be referring to the theft of what was left of the *'stumpe'* in the Tower – the larger piece as Lusher called it. Who actually took this last remnant of the Croes Naid, and when they did so, will probably never be known, the thief's tracks being well and truly shrouded by time along a provenance trail of winding complexity.

If, as now seems increasingly likely, it was the Holy Wood from the *Welsh Cross* that was in the Tower of London, then the last surviving remnants of the treasure seized by Edward I from Gwynedd still remain with us today. Saint Elen of Caernarfon's own gift to her fellow Britons will still be treasured long into the future by people who recognise its symbolic numenosity. Perhaps even one day the Diocese of Ghent would be willing to lend the relic to Wales for public display, although the bishop may be mindful of a clear warning: *'lest the king hear about it and be offended, and demand its return'*. An Elgin Marbles situation?

In the meantime, the ancient streets named after Saint Elen will continue to weave their way across the Welsh landscape, her memory having become enshrined forever in the valleys where the fennel grows that still bears her illustrious name.





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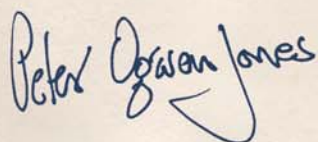
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A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Peter Ogwen Jones". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.







